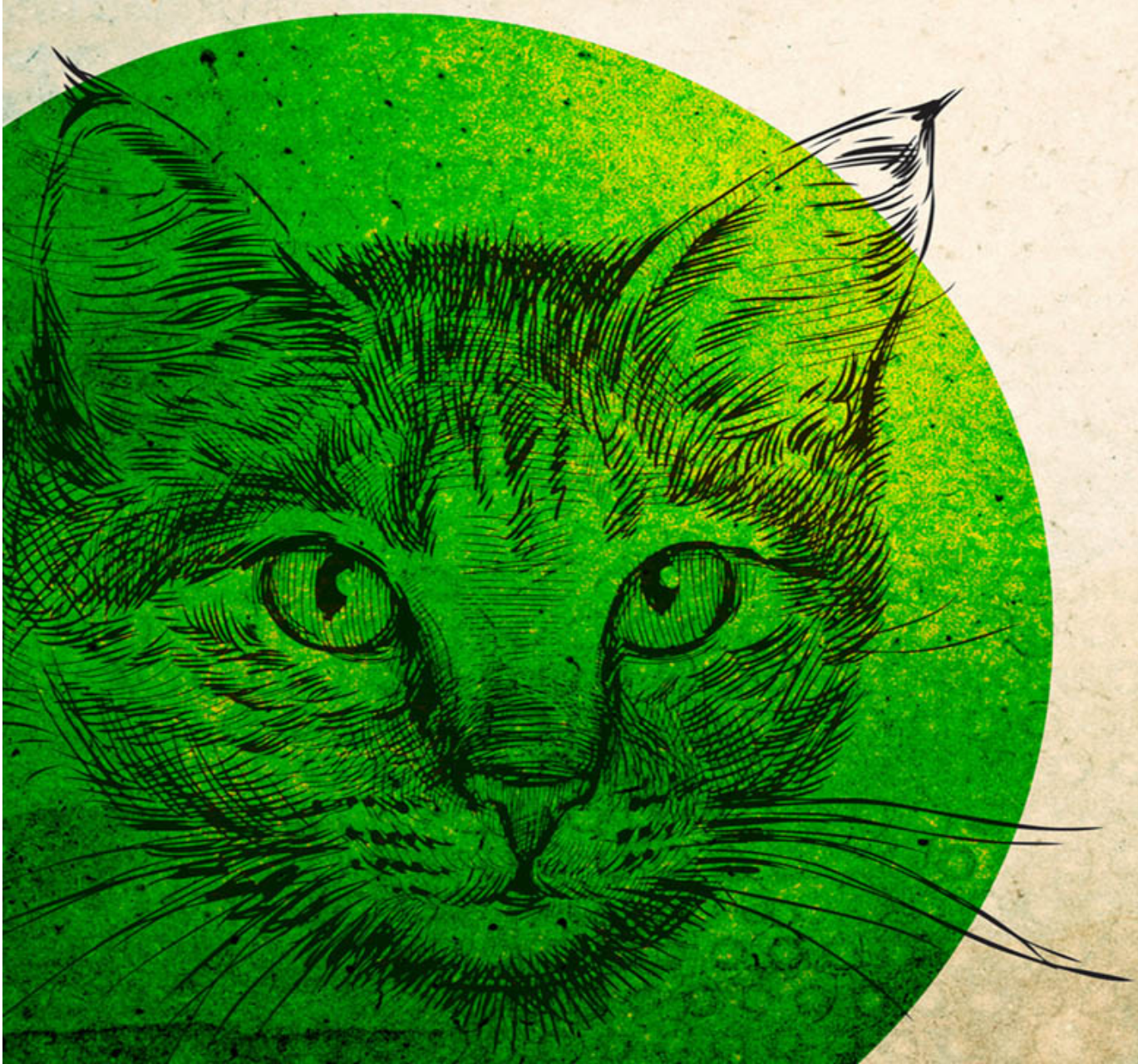
FRITZ LEIBER

THE GREEN MILLENNIUM



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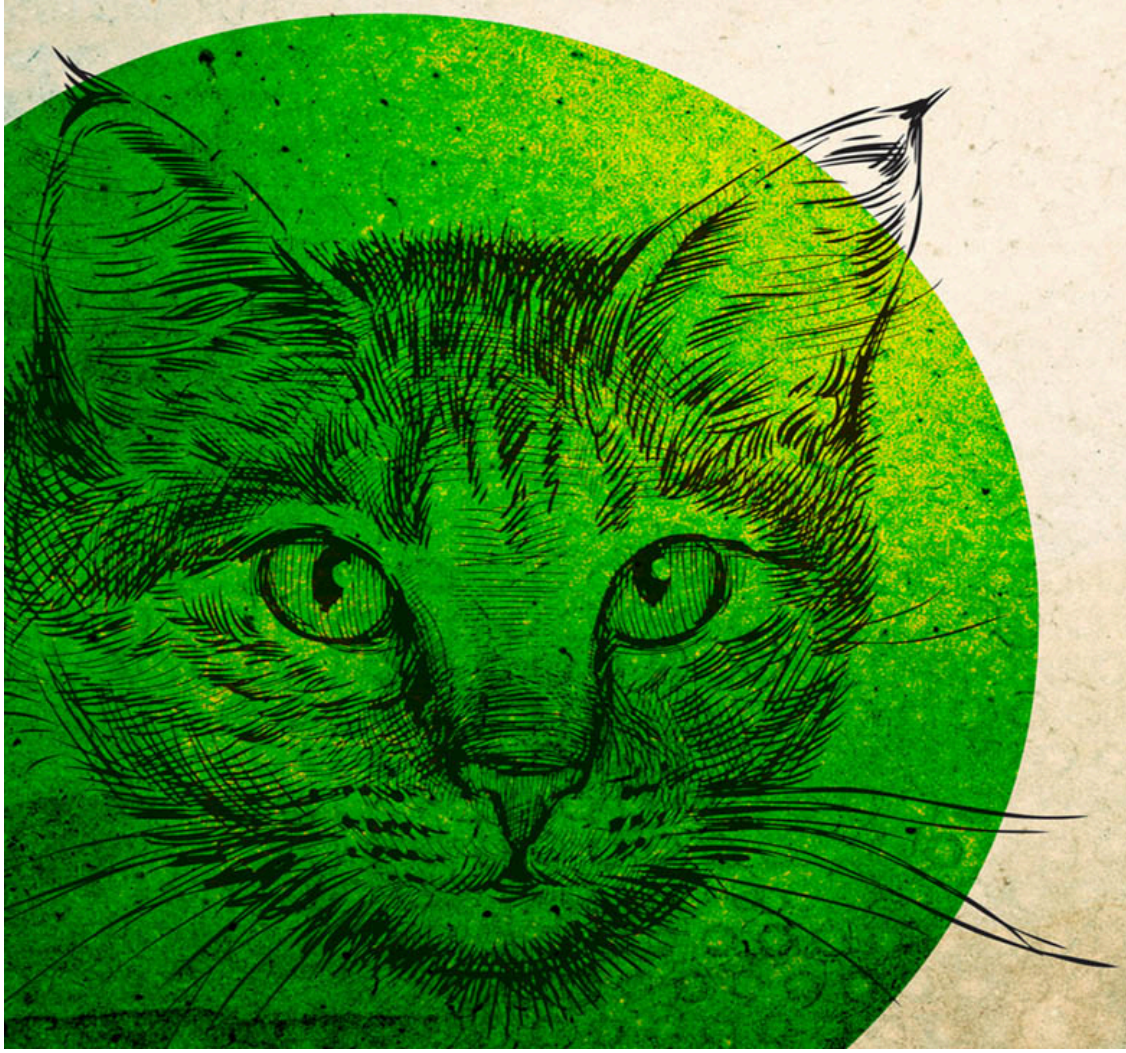

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The Green Millennium

Fritz Liber

For BOB, FRANK, HANK, GERT, and WENDELL

I

PHIL GISH woke up feeling as good as if all his previous life had happened to two other guys—poor, miserable clunks!

Usually his whip-cracking reflexes had him out of bed in a flash and jerking on his shorts and sockasins while he frantically hunted around for the jar of beard-dissolving cream. But this time he was able to outsmart all tyrannous nerve-impulses and keep his eyes closed in order to enjoy the unprecedented sensation all to himself, not even sharing it with the advertisement-covered walls of his tiny bachelor apartment.

Why, it was simply wonderful, he decided after a bit. Outrageously, impossibly wonderful!

He actually felt as if this were not a world in which hot and cold wars had been gushing unpredictably for fifty years like temperamental faucets, in which the Federal Bureau of Loyalty and Fun Incorporated ruled the U.S.A. in the name of that drunken, hymn-singing farmer, President Robert T. Barnes, and in which (according to the Kremlin Newsmoon, located on an earth-circling satellite vehicle) a new plan was being considered for exchanging the descendants of prisoners taken in the half-century-old Korean War.

And as if he, Phil Gish, weren't a luck-forsaken little guy who on waking at eight o'clock this morning hadn't taken four sleeping pills in order to kill the day and temporarily forget that he had just lost another job to a robot who did it five times as fast and twice as accurately, and that he'd had a blow-up because of it and been coldly advised to see a psychiatrist.

He took a long, luxurious breath. Even the air smelt and felt different, as if dusted with some golden chemical that banished care.

He opened his eyes and looked down at his pale chest with the two lone hairs that were a sardonic last farewell from glorious jungle ape-hood. But this time the word that came to him was “slim,” not “scrawny.” He rather liked his body, he decided—a neat and compact, if not exactly outsize, bit of tissue. He yawned, stretched, scratched where the two hairs were, and looked around. The green cat sat on the sill of the large open circular window, smiling at him.

“Hey, am I dreaming?"

The sound of his own voice, with its hint of a morning croak, answered that question.

Or have I really blasted off from behind the hair line? The second question, thought not spoken, was quickly suppressed. He felt too good to let it worry him. If this was insanity, then three cheers for paranoia!

Besides, there were all sorts of natural explanations of the cat's somewhat unconventional color. Just yesterday Phil had seen a young matron leading two rose-colored poodles. A flash of what might be an off-the-bosom dress under her cloak had moved him to pass close enough to hear her assure her companion, “They aren't dye-jobs, you mood-mad man. They're mutations!"

Also, weren't some animals naturally green, like the tree-sloth? Though he seemed to recall that the tree-sloth's hue was due to a fungus or mold, and there certainly wasn't any mold on the burnished bundle of benignity on his window sill.

“Hiya, Lucky,” he greeted softly. From the very first he had decided to connect the cat with his newborn, incredible sense of well-being. If there was going to be a new era in his life, it was a good idea to have a symbol for it—a symbol green as spring itself. Besides, it felt that way.

“C'mere, Lucky,” he called without lifting his head from the spongy pillow. “Here, Kitty."

The second invitation, which sounded a trifle silly to Phil as soon as he said it, wasn't necessary. The cat at once dropped its plump-tummied body from the window sill and trotted toward him like a soft-shod fat little horse. Phil felt an odd increase, almost frightening, in the calm joy inside him. The cat disappeared momentarily under the angle of the bedside. Then a little green face came over the edge and two tiny green paws placed themselves beside it, and two coppery eyes inspected him.

“How are you, fellow?” Phil asked. “Glad to make your acquaintance. You're a cool little cuss, all right. Where did you come from?"

The little face tipped upward.

“From upstairs?” Phil asked and instantly chuckled at himself for interpreting the movement as a gesture. “Why not stay with me for a while? I like your looks and I admire your color. Often wished I were green myself. Anything for variety—begging your pardon."

It was a strange and curiously attractive cat face. The ears were large, the forehead high, the nose-button lost in furry down, the whiskers hardly apparent, and the mouth had a suggestion of a pucker or pout. For a fleeting instant Phil had the notion Lucky might look rather different, rather less like a cat, if caught unawares. And he was really very green—the green of tarnished copper, only brighter.

Thinking the word "he," Phil wondered for a fleeting instant about Lucky's sex. The fat tummy was suggestive. Yet he was somehow sure the cat was a male.

Then Lucky smiled again and Phil was aware only of feelings. He reached out a tentative hand, jerked it back when a little paw flicked out at it, then shamefacedly corrected the gesture. The little paw touched his middle finger. Phil stroked the silken paw in turn. Neither time could he feel a hint of claws. They must all be tucked inside their smooth sheathes.

"Now we're friends," Phil said huskily. The cat sprang fearlessly onto the bed. Coppery eyes came close. A furry cheek briefly brushed Phil's with casual masculine friendliness. Sudden tears smarted in Phil's eyes, enough to brim the lids but not to run over.

What a lonely, empty-lifed fool he must be, he told himself, that a cat could make him cry. Yet it was true enough. All his life had been a fading. His parents had seemed warm and wonderful at first, but then he had begun to sense their gray uncertainties and boredoms. School had been full of breathtaking promise at one point, with infinite vistas of knowledge and idealistic brotherhood opening up; but too many of the vistas had ended in signs saying "restricted" or "subversive" or the even more maddening blank signs of calculated silence—just as man had promised himself he'd reach the planets soon, but hadn't. Phil had had friends, too, at one time, and had really been in love with girls; but even that had somehow become washed out and worthless. And then the endless business of being beaten out of jobs by white-collar robots, beginning with the mail-sorting robots who fed envelopes into the proper slots by scanning their addresses photoelectrically. The only thing robots couldn't do, it seemed, was sit in foxholes. That was one place where Phil recalled no mechanical competition.

Yes, it had been a very empty, purposeless life indeed, Phil told himself, at the same time wondering why even that thought could not mar his

present happiness.

He came out of his reverie and saw that the cat was marching down the bed, closely inspecting his naked body.

"Hey, we're friends, but that's going too far. Leave me *some* privacy!" Chuckling, he swung out of bed, grabbing up a light robe as his body left the cone of radiant heat projected from the ceiling fixture. While shuddering into the robe he hummed a couple of bars from "Kiss Me, Darling, in Free-Fall" and did a shuffling step that brought the cat hurrying over to play tag with his toes.

"Where *did* you come from, Lucky?" Phil repeated and turned toward the window. In the three steps it took him to reach it, his gaze lit on the near-empty dispenser of sleeping pills and for a moment the eerie doubt came back: mightn't this morning's overdose have triggered off or paralleled a really big change in his mind? After all, this cat wasn't normal (and neither were hallucinations!) and his crazy, inexplicable happiness was altogether too much like the inner world of godlike perfection into which the paranoiac is supposed to retreat.

But then he was at the window experiencing a new twist in his mood and the doubt was forgotten.

The window opened on a deep, very narrow bay in the remodeled monster hotel in which Phil roomed. If he risked his neck by leaning out very far, he could just manage to look out of the bay and glimpse an advertisement-encrusted corner of Fun Incorporated's wrestling center and the helicopter field on its roof. The hotel had been built as a luxury palace for the new war-rich of the 1970's but during the great housing shortage of the 1980's its vast rooms had been cut up into tiny sleeping cells. It retained, however, at least one feature from its lordly days: the large circular windows formed of two sheets of polarizing glass, the inner of which could be rotated, allowing a person to blacken his window or have it fully transparent or enjoy any shade of twilight. One other very unusual luxury touch was that the windows could actually be opened, swinging on pivots at top and bottom. Nowadays, with radiant sleep-heating general throughout the hotel and the air-conditioning system anything but trustworthy, this last feature was put to real use more often than might have been expected, though windows were still kept closed most of the daytime.

It had always seemed to Phil that the great gray wall just ten feet from his window, with its rows of ominous portholes, many of them blackened, was the grimmest sight in the world—a symbol of the way he was walled off from life and people.

But now, as he stood leaning out just a little, his cropped hair brushing the tarnished circular rim, it seemed to him that he could imagine his way through that wall as if it were made of some material that conducted emotion as copper conducts electricity. Not see or think through it, but *feel* through it to the multiple texture of warm, pitiful, admirable, ridiculous human lives in the cubicles behind: the two-fifths happy ones, the nine-tenths sad ones, the ones who nursed fears and frustrations because you had to nurse something, the ones who hammered fears and frustrations into a painful armor, the old man apprehensively sorting his limp ration stamps from three communo-capitalist wars, the boy playing spaceship and pretending the blacked-out window was the porthole of a comic-book intergalactic liner, the three unemployed secretaries—one of them pacing—the lovers whose rendezvous was tainted with worries about the Federal Bureau of Morality, the fat man feeling a girl's caress by radio handie and thinking of something long ago, the old woman coddling her dread of war-germs and atomic ashes by constantly dusting, dusting, dusting...

Well, his new self certainly had a vivid imagination, Phil decided with a smile.

An old hand came out of a porthole three floors down and shook something—or nothing—from a dustpan.

Coincidence, of course, or else he'd once watched the woman without thinking about it—nevertheless, Phil chose to interpret the event as an encouraging confirmation of his new feeling of outgoingness. Then the smile left his lips as he thought of another aspect of the opposite wall.

This window was the vantage point where he had spent countless drearily excited hours spying on the activities of all the young women whose cubicles were even remotely within range. Not the new girl—the one who wore her black hair in old-fashioned pony style—in the room straight across, although she was quite beautiful in a sprightly, animal way, and he sometimes heard her practicing tap-dancing. No, she was a bit too close and besides, he was vaguely frightened of her. There was something eerily

dryad-like about her and, in any case, she blacked out her porthole religiously. It was blacked out now, though slightly ajar.

But all the other girls were recipients of his untiring, sterile interest. The cute green-blonde just below and to the left, for instance, Miss Phoebe Filmer (he'd once taken the unprecedentedly realistic step of finding out her name), why, he'd sacrificed a sizable chunk of his leisure time to that tantalizing minx. There she was at this very moment dithering around in a short play robe, inspecting an assortment of wispy lingerie—a very promising situation that normally would have held Phil helpless for twenty minutes or more. But now he found he could look at her and then look away without the faintest gnawing worry he might miss something. Good Lord, if he wanted to see more, in any sense, of Miss Phoebe Filmer, he'd scrape up an acquaintance with her.

"Prrrt!" A feathery, furry ball came into his hand and he looked down at Lucky's apple-green face framed by his curving forefinger and thumb.

"What d'ya want, cat?"

Lucky ducked out of the cupped hand with a twist that let his forehead and ear be rubbed, and put his front paws on the window rim. Phil quickly advanced his hand so that it lightly circled the cat's chest. He didn't want Lucky to get back out on the little ledge that led to either side of the window. In fact, as Phil now definitely realized, he didn't want Lucky to leave him at all, though something told him he wouldn't be able to stop Lucky if the green cat really wanted to go.

It occurred to Phil, with a certain shamefaced satisfaction, that all pets were strictly forbidden in the Skyway Towers (cats and dogs were pretty rare since the germ war days when they'd been slaughtered as possible carriers) and so Lucky's owner wouldn't be able to do anything openly about getting him back.

But Lucky seemed to have no intention of leaving. He hopped to the floor and looked eagerly at Phil.

"Prrrt!"

"Do you want something to eat? Is that it?"

"Prrrt-prt!"

Phil took mental inventory of his snack box and found himself thinking of the cranberry concentrate. Wildly inappropriate—and yet something assured him that it would be just right for Lucky.

It was done quickly: a dark-red marble that swelled to a glistening ruby golf ball at the touch of water, and then, another sudden inward prompting, the syrupy contents of a vitamino capsule poured over it.

The last ingredient smelled rather rank and by the time he set the odd sundae on the floor, Phil was feeling quite doubtful. However, Lucky examined it with all signs of approval, mewing in eagerness. But then instead of beginning to eat, he looked up at Phil. Phil thought he understood: cats have their special proprieties and delicacies. The little chap wanted to eat in private.

“Okay, fellow, I'll go shower. And I won't peek."

Stepping inside the bathroom, he set the shower control to alternate tepid and very warm. Instead it chose irresponsibly to alternate icy and steaming, so that he leaped out with a yell. But the incident didn't even scratch his mood. As he toweled himself (he didn't like the air drier and toweling robots made him uneasy) he sang:

We're out in space, they've cut the jet,
There isn't any ceiling, floor, or wall.
Let's dance on air, or better yet—
Hug me, love me, darling, in free-fall!

He came out of the bathroom feeling like an emperor and fully determined to inspect the world he owned, the world that was any man's for the asking and a little courage. As he slipped on singlet, trousers, sockasins and jacket, he explained his feelings to Lucky, who had cleaned up every bit of his colorful meal.

“You see, it's this way, fellow: I've always been three-quarters dead. But not any more. I'm through with being scared and stand-offish and bored. No more filing, dial-watching, and tape-cutting jobs, with some about-to-be-invented robot breathing down my neck. I'm just going out and look things over, talk to people, find out what it's all about. I'm going to have adventures, really live. Some program, eh? And you know who's responsible for it, fellow? You are."

Lucky seemed fairly to fluoresce in appreciation. He fluffed his gleaming green fur.

Phil wondered what time it was. His wrist-watch had gone dead yesterday, the cranky thing, only five months after having the battery replaced. He stuck his head out the window and looked up the dizzy gray

crack to where the portholes were tiny dots and the slit ended in a ribbon of blue sky. Only the top floor to the east was yellow with true sunlight, though the false sunlight from the sodium mirror circling the earth to make evening light for this city was beginning to show about eight stories down.

He scooped up Lucky without a thought of leaving him behind or a worry as to the attention he might attract. But the verdant cat sprang from his arms and made for the hall door, looking back as if to say, “I'm right there with you and game for any adventure, too, but I don't need a nurse."

Side by side they walked to the stairs and down to twenty-eight—the overworked elevator stopped only at even-numbered floors. And there he ran into Phoebe Filmer, play robe swishing and apparently headed for the snack bar on twenty-eight.

“Hello, Miss Filmer,” he heard himself say. “I've admired you for a long time."

“You have?” she said, glancing at him sideways. “How did you know my name?"

“Just asked the desk robot who the beautiful girl was in 28-303a."

She tittered with a faintly flirtatious contempt. “You don't talk to the desk robot. You just punch buttons and it won't give out names when you punch room numbers, unless you have a government key."

“I have a way with robots,” Phil explained. “I win their confidence with small talk."

“Well,” Miss Filmer observed, turning her head and running her hand through her green-gold hair.

“Say, how do you like my green cat?” Phil inquired.

“A green cat!” Miss Filmer exclaimed excitedly. She looked down quickly and then up skeptically. “Where?"

Phil looked down too. Lucky wasn't anywhere in sight. A hunk of ice materialized inside his chest. “Excuse me,” he said. “I hope I'll see you again."

He raced to the stub corridor. Lucky was standing in front of the elevator.

“Gee, fellow,” Phil told him. “Don't give me heart failure."

II

THE street snarled at Phil. The snarl came chiefly from a charged-up electric hot rod that swerved close to the curb to remove a triangular chunk from the rump of a fat man who had been too slow in skittering to safety. A second look showed he was not a fat man, but a thin man in a balloon suit. It deflated rapidly, and he sat down in its limp folds on the curb and began to sob. Balloon suits were of no real protection to pedestrians, except by increasing the apparent target, but they continued as a fad. During the last war they had been pumped full of hydrogen as a shield against neutrons until a couple of small but unpleasant explosions in crowded shelters had caused the government to crack down.

After snarling, the street continued to growl deep in its throat—it had two lower levels. The growl was composed of the hum of electrics, the subterranean rumble of heavier traffic, the yak-yak of competing vocal advertisements, and the nervous shuffle of feet that was the same when Rome and Babylon were young, but that was intensified here because most of the women's feet were on platforms three to ten inches high.

Neither the growl nor the snarl disturbed Phil. Normally he'd already have had his ear plugs tucked in, his face fixed straight ahead, his eyes nervously questing for hot rods, which were known to jump curbs. But today he simply wanted to drink it all in, to see the things he'd always been blind to, to note the anxious but apathetic expressions on the faces of the pedestrians, to sense the invisible lines of force that, like spider webs or marionette strings, joined them to the space-overflowing advertisements, which ranged from the crisp, “Learn to Break Necks!” and the cute “A Strip-Tease Doll All Your Own!” to the “Why Not Lobotomy?” and the imagination-tantalizing “Glamorize Your Figure with a Sprayed-on Evening Dress! Plasticfabric cures in a jiffy, breathes. No heat, no adhesions! Special forms flare the skirt, shape the bosom! Designed by artists right on your body!"

Lucky seemed no more frightened of the street than Phil. He scampered along close to the base of Skyway Towers’ monumental facade, the camouflaging green color of which may have explained why none of the

pedestrians took note of him—not that any explanation was needed as to why those walking nerve-bags didn't see things right under their noses!

A gleaming sales robot veered toward Phil on its silent wheels, but Phil deftly interposed another balloon-suited man between himself and it. The balloon-suited man began to get a slick reducing pill sales talk; evidently the robot had scanned his profile. Phil hurried around the corner after Lucky, who had turned down garish Opperly Avenue.

As if he had picked up a scent, Lucky abruptly left the wall, glided across the sidewalk and padded across Opperly Avenue between the passing cars. Phil followed, not without a certain heart pounding, but with no real anxieties. Something allowed him to sense easily the intentions of all the cars in the block—dodging them was almost fun.

He reached the opposite curb a good five feet ahead of a playful youth in a jalopy with a tin body like a space jeep scribbled over with such signs as “Oh, You Venusian!” and “Girls beware—escape speed zero.” Effortlessly recovering his breath, Phil found himself facing an ornate cave mouth flanked with old-fashioned fluorescent posters, the largest lettering on which read: “TONIGHT! Juno Jones, the Man-Maiming Amazon *vs.* Dwarf Zubek, the Bone-Crushing Misogynist."

But he had no time to read the rest of the bill, for Lucky was dancing up the broad corridor lined with giant stereographs of menacing, half-naked men and women, looking in the dim light like genies freshly materialized from smoke.

Ordinarily Phil would have felt a certain amount of disgust mixed with fear and uneasy fascination at entering, or even passing, a wrestling palace specializing in male-female, but today it seemed simply a part of life. It never occurred to him not to follow Lucky.

Just short of some turnstiles and a robot ticket taker lost in shadows, a side corridor spilled light. Lucky whisked into it. Phil had barely rounded the corner after him when a long, handless, boneless gray arm shot out of the wall and slapped itself firmly against Phil's middle.

“Where you think you're going, Mack?” a voice rasped from the wall. “On your way.” And it gave him a quick shove toward the ticket taker.

Phil could see Lucky mincing inquisitively down the side corridor, which was lined with doors. He tried to go around the arm, but it extended itself until it stretched from wall to wall.

“Still here?” the rasping wall inquired. “Look, Mack, I don't know your voice. If you got business with somebody, name me their name and the word they gave you."

“I just want to get my cat,” Phil answered. Lucky had reached the end of the corridor and was peering into the last doorway. “Here, Lucky,” he called, but the cat took no notice.

“Means nothing to me,” the wail rasped on. “You still ain't named me no names that tripped any of my relays."

Lucky disappeared through the doorway. Phil said, “Please let me through a minute to get my cat,” trying to sound as sincere as he could. “I'll be right back."

“I ain't letting nobody through,” the wall asserted. “Give me a name and word, quick, Mack."

At that instant an appalling spasm of fear went through Phil, as if a light had been turned out inside his mind and his heart sprayed with liquid ice. He knew that something had happened to Lucky. He ducked under the gray arm and darted forward, but before he had taken five steps he felt himself grabbed. The corridor whirled as he was roughly spun back. Looking down he saw the elastic arm wrapped around him like a gray python, while the wall grated in his ear, “No go, Mack. Now I'll have to hold you till the man comes."

“Let me go. I've got to get in there, do you hear!” Phil yelled. He struggled futilely to release his arms, yet all the while he kept his eyes on the doorway through which Lucky had vanished. “Let me go!"

“Hey, what goes on?” A large, tall woman with close cropped blonde hair, a broken nose, an outsize jaw and big blue eyes had stepped out of the nearest doorway. “Cool down, son,” she boomed out, coming toward him. “What did you want?"

“My cat ran in here,” he explained, trying to speak calmly, “It ran in that room down there at the end.” He nodded his head toward it. “I tried to go after it and this thing grabbed me."

“Your cat?"

“Yes, a pet."

She thought. He noticed for the first time, perhaps because he was watching the far doorway so closely, that she wore maroon tights and was

stripped to the waist. Her breasts were small, her shoulders sloped steeply and were heavily, though not cordily, muscled.

"Okay," she said after a bit. "Let him go," she told the wall.

"Didn't give a name or word," the wall complained. "Tried to duck through. Got to hold him till the man comes."

"Which'll be at least an hour, if I know Jake. Let him go, you dumb robot," she said in a majestic bass. "This man is my friend. I am inviting him in."

"All right, Mrs. Jones," the wall said, sounding almost sulky. The gray arm unwrapped from Phil and shot back into the wall.

"Now go find your cat and then beat it," the giantess told him.

"Thank you very much," Phil said, half turning to her, but keeping the far doorway in the corner of his gaze. But she didn't answer, only stared after him doubtfully, still appearing quite unconscious of her partial nakedness.

Phil tried not to hurry, although the corridor seemed endless. He kept telling himself that nothing had happened to Lucky, and wished very hard he could believe it. He didn't feel big any more, or adventurous. He passed the woman's door, vaguely noticing heaps of untidy clothes and a stationary rubber-armed robot for wrestling practice. He came to the door at the end, having observed that all the others were tightly shut. He hesitated. He couldn't hear a sound. He stepped inside.

The room was large, low ceilinged, and lined with lockers and benches. At the far end was a closed door, flanked by two low mechanical massage tables, their jointed rubber-fisted arms extended crookedly upward and making them look like two beetles on their backs. There were a few other pieces of apparatus, none of which Phil recognized, but most of the floor was empty.

Almost in the center of the floor was a brown box about a foot square. Staring at it, their backs turned to Phil, were two men. One was rather small but quick looking, dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and tight black trousers, and holding some sort of gun. The other was smaller and slighter, and similarly clad in blue. He held a wire leading to the box.

Phil cleared his throat. The two men eyed him expressionlessly, then turned back to the box. Phil edged forward into the room, peering into the corners for Lucky. Then he jerked back. He had almost stepped on a dead mouse.

Looking more closely, he saw there were half a dozen dead mice scattered around the floor.

He cleared his throat again, louder, but this time the men didn't even look around. He started forward again, stepping gingerly over the dead mouse.

There was a click. A tiny door opened in the top of the brown box and a mouse catapulted out. Hitting the floor, it made off in frantic zig-zags, skidding at each turn. Phil stared, suddenly expecting Lucky to come darting out of a corner after it. The man in black followed the zig-zags with his gun. There was no sound or flash from the gun, but the mouse stopped moving.

“Try to surprise me better next time, Cookie,” the man in black told his companion. “I saw your hand move when you punched the button.” They resumed their alert, motionless stance.

Moving around them in a cautious circle, Phil searched for Lucky. He soon realized there were few likely places of concealment. The lockers reached from floor to ceiling and were all closed.

One of the dead mice began to twitch. Cookie put down the wire with the push-button at the end of it, picked up the mouse and dumped it in the box through a side door. Phil was beginning to feel very queer. He felt there must be some connection between Lucky and the mice, but it was a dream connection that didn't make sense. The muscles in the calves of his legs had begun to ache from his silent tip-toeing.

Nerving himself, he approached the motionless pair. “Excuse me,” he said with difficulty, “but did you see a cat come in here?"

The words got no more response than the throat clearing. “I beg your pardon,” he said, “but really I must find out,” and he barely touched the elbow of the man in black.

The response was instantaneous, though from another quarter. Phil was grabbed by his jacket front and jerked back by Cookie, whose infantile features were now tensed into a hard mask.

“What you did!” The voice was shrilly scandalized. “Interrupting the kingman at his recreation! Shoving the kingman around! That brings punishment, that brings pain!"

Phil felt sick with fear. He knew if only Lucky were there, if only he could recapture his earlier mood of golden confidence, he wouldn't be so

shamelessly terrified of this little bully who was holding him at arm's length.

He wet his lips. “I was only trying to find my cat,” he quavered, “and I didn't shove him."

“You did too! I saw you! A great big rude shove! And as for cats, Swish Jack Jones, the Lady Killer, is the top cat around here, the only cat.” The hand holding him twisted his lapels tighter around his throat. “You can't weasel out of what's coming to you. Well, Jackie, what are you going to do to him?"

And now, at long last, the man in black moved. He slowly turned his head in its ruff of black wool and fixed on Phil the sad, weary smile of a king who knows it is his boring but inescapable fate to inflict doom and punishment. He slowly reached out his hand until it grasped Phil's elbow.

“Please don't,” Phil whispered, but just then a thumb dug into a nerve between his bones and he couldn't keep back a squeal of pain. The baby-faced man grinned with mincing approval, as if at last the proprieties were being satisfied.

Swish Jack Jones frowned, as if he felt the squeal hadn't been loud enough, and lifted his other hand. “This is a stun gun,” he said in a voice patchily varnished with intellectualism. “Ultrasonic. I might spray your spine with it to get you ready for being worked over. It's set for mouse power now, but I'll step it up if necessary."

Phil's guts turned to water. “You don't need to hurt me,” he said. “I tell you I was just looking for a cat."

The other shook his head sadly and said, “Nosey little men up to Bast knows what shouldn't tell such great big lies.” And he reached for Phil's thigh.

At that moment the tidal wave struck. Cookie was shoved ten feet, the stun gun clattered on the floor, Swish Jack Jones had taken a quick backward spring, and the blonde giantess was planted enragedly in front of Phil and was thundering, “You know mucking well I can stand anything except when you start bullying people."

She had slipped on a very dirty short kimono, beautifully embroidered in the finest Oriental style, except that the figure on the back was not a dragon, but a fire-breathing spaceship.

“Don't touch me, Juno, I'm telling you,” the man in black snarled in a voice that had lost a lot of its intellectual veneer. He was massaging a slapped wrist.

“I licked you the first time I was matched with you,” the giantess replied. “I licked you the night I married you. And I can do it again anytime. You *and* Cookie here,” she added as the latter made a grimace that was intended to be threatening but merely registered spite. “Why was you tormenting the little guy?"

“Tormenting?” Jack's voice rose. “I wasn't tormenting him. Just taking precautions. He came in here like a screwball, not saying anything, dancing around on his toes, babbling about a cat. As if he was about to go off his nut. Dangerous."

Cookie's tight-lipped face bobbed up and down in agreement, but Juno wasn't at all impressed. “He seemed about as dangerous to me as yeast spread. Why didn't you let him find his cat and get out?"

Jack's face registered astonishment. “Juno, was it you let in this Ikeless Joe?” (It took Phil a moment to realize Ikeless meant lacking I.Q.) “I was wondering how he got past Old Rubberarm. Do you mean to say you fell for that story about a cat?"

“Well, isn't there one?” Juno demanded, scanning the room.

“How could there be, Juno?” Jack protested, the barest note of intellectual superiority beginning to creep into his voice. “You didn't see one, did you? No. And if there had been a cat, wouldn't it have been after these mice like a shot? And where could it hide in here, anyway? It couldn't have got in there,” he went on as Juno's gaze rested on the inner door. *"He's* in there.” Juno nodded. “So where could it be, I ask you?” Jack finished. “You don't suppose Cookie and me ... I kidnapped it, do you?"

Juno rubbed her battered nose thoughtfully. She turned on Phil a face that was friendly but heavy with doubt. “Let's hear some more about that cat, son. What color was it?"

“Green,” Phil heard himself say, and even as he saw the looks of incredulity appear on the faces around him, he couldn't keep himself from going on: “Yes, bright green. And he liked cranberry sauce. He just came to me an hour ago. I called him Lucky because he made me feel so good, as if I could understand everything."

There was a long silence. Phil felt his spirits sink past zero. Then Juno laid on his shoulder a huge hand that made it sag. “Come on, son,” she said gently. “You better get going."

Jack strode up with a wry eye on Juno. “Look, Mister,” he said to Phil in a solicitous voice in which the mockery was still cautious, “I had an appointment with an analyst for tonight, but I think you need it more than I do.” And handed Phil a torn-off bit of phonoscribe tape. Phil accepted it humbly and put it in his pocket. Cookie tittered. Juno whirled on him. “Look,” she roared, “his being a nut doesn't excuse laughing at him any more than bullying!"

The inner door opened, but Phil couldn't see inside, because a tall, fat man with a sooty jowl and thick dark glasses pretty well filled it. Phil sensed a note of respectfulness in the other three.

“What's the racketting about?” the fat man demanded in a voice which startled Phil because it was Old Rubberarm's

“This guy—” Cookie began, but stopped at a quick look from Jack.

The thick glasses flashed at Phil. “Oh, one of your nut admirers, Jack,” the fat man said comprehendingly. “Get him out of here."

“Sure, Mr. Brimstine,” Jack said. “Right away."

The inner door closed. Phil let Juno steer him through the other. He felt way down in the minuses. So much so that he almost didn't notice the odd couple coming down the corridor toward them. The man looked saintly, yet sprightly. He was very sunburned and he wore orange shoes and an orange beret. The woman looked like a youngish witch, but with the nose and chin already seeking each other. A little red hat was attached by twenty long hatpins to her coarse dark hair, and she had a red skirt stiff and thick as a carpet. Both of them were wearing black turtlenecked sweaters. Phil noted them numbly, lost in his own distress, but was vaguely aware that they were pointedly ignoring the giantess at his side.

“You'll find your little tin hero back there shooting mice,” she snarled at them as they passed. The woman merely snooted her witchy nose, but then the sunburned man looked around with elfin eyes and a benign smile. “Joy, Juno,” he admonished lightly. “Nothing but joy."

The giantess looked after them glumly for a moment, then went on. “Couple of Jack's intelleckchul fans,” she confided bitterly. “Poets,

religious nuts, and all that goes with it. Completely turned his head, the stinkers."

They reached the corner. Old Rubberarm waggled the tip of a fingerless hand and muttered, “No loitering,” but Juno silenced him with a weary, “Shut up!"

“Now get along home, son,” she told Phil. “I don't know as I'd visit that analyzer of Jack's. Probably some fancy guy he got put onto by the Akeleys—those two intelleckchul jerks you just saw. But maybe some kind of psycher would be a good idea.” She patted his shoulder and grinned, showing a scar inside her lip. “I'm sorry about what happened back there—that lousy husband of mine. Anytime you feel like it, drop in on me. Old Rubberarm's got your voice pattern. Just ask for Juno Jones. Only one thing, son—no more green cats."

III

THROUGH half closed lids, whose lashes blurred everything, Phil watched the ghostly pale yellow circle of the window, which was all the illumination he could bear now. He hadn't put on any lights when the sun had set and the sodium mirror above the stratosphere made the only light, and minutes ago he'd switched off the TV screen although the girl's voice still crooned a sex song and he still wore the fat mitten of the handie. But the pressure of her fingers, holding a hydraulically compartmented artificial hand and transmitting over the airwaves an electric signal to change pressures of the hydraulic compartments of the handie, began to feel like that of a skeleton wearing rubber gloves. Phil jerked off the handie, switched off the voice, lit a cigarette, and was back with his problem.

Was he really crazy, he asked himself; was Lucky just a psycho's dream cat, or had he somehow been tricked? Once again he tormentedly totted up the evidence. Nobody but himself had admitted to seeing Lucky. And there were so many other indications of hallucinations: that crazy color, the silly food, his fleeting hunch that Lucky wasn't “really” a cat, his suspiciously godlike elation and sense of power.

But those feelings of his were also the reason that Lucky *had* to exist. After what had happened today, Phil simply couldn't endure life without Lucky, without those warm insights that had galvanized him this afternoon and shut away all thoughts of his lost job, his loneliness, his cowardice and frustrations. “Lucky,” he whispered without knowing he'd been going to, and the sick child sound of his voice frightened him so that he fumbled in his pocket for the phonoscribe tape Swish Jack Jones had given him. Puffing his cigarette hard so that it made a hell red glow, he read the smoky words, “Dr. Anton Romadka. Top of The Keep. Eight O'Clock."

He visualized the thin black shaft of The Keep, a luxurious office-hotel, and thought of how few minutes it would take him to get there. But then he suddenly crumpled the paper in his pocket and began to pace. Going to Dr. Romadka would mean that he didn't really believe in Lucky.

He thought of the sleeping pills but was afraid there weren't enough left. He reached for a book he'd been reading, but the thought of its stereotyped

sadistic plot was unbearably boring. As a last resort he turned on the radio again, voice and sight.

"...ravins the antichrist."

That phrase, together with the gaunt bucolic face, inevitably meant that President Robert T. Barnes was telling his Fellow Americans about Russia all over again.

"But there are sinners on this side of the polar battlegrounds," the great midwestern father-image continued, swaying forward and arching his bushy eyebrows. "Sinners in our midst, creatures of the fleshpots. They have catered too long to the vilest desires and lusts." He shook a finger and swayed once more. "I warn them that their time is at hand."

Phil reached for the knob (how often had Barnes made those futile, and some said drunken, threats, when everyone knew his administration was hand in glove with Fun Incorporated!) but he hesitated as an unfamiliar and rather eerie note crept into the President's voice.

"Fellow Americans," Barnes almost whispered, wobbling a little from side to side, "strange forces are abroad, insane thoughts, spirits of the upper air like those which troubled ancient Babylon. Our minds are being worked upon, it is the final testing time for—"

His momentary curiosity gone, Phil twisted the knob to silence and darkness. Nevertheless, the President's rhetoric set the tone of his next reverie. He did not pace now, but crouched back in the foam chair wedged between the radio and bed.

He must be crazy, he told himself with a quiet certainty that didn't hurt for the moment, perhaps because he sat so very still. Everything he'd felt this afternoon had been out of character, including his ridiculous overvaluation of that dream cat.

Yes, he must be crazy.

At that moment the dim circle of the window was intersected by a smaller and much brighter circle. He automatically stood up and stepped forward.

The girl in the room across the bay had switched on her light. Now she threw down a cloak and walked around the room as if searching for something, the horsetail of black hair flirting from side to side as she turned her head this way and that. She was less than twenty feet away and he could see her clearly. She was wearing a gray suit fashionably pied with great splotches of black. Her face was compact, nose small, mouth broad, eyes

very wide set, and, as Phil now noticed definitely for the first time, her ears were lobeless and curved up to an almost faun-like tip. As on those rare occasions when he'd glimpsed her before, he felt a quiver of uneasiness.

She shrugged her shoulders, as if giving up her hunt, and walked over to the window, looking straight at Phil. He shrank back a bit, though he knew he was invisible. She grasped a knob on the rim and swung her hand in a quarter-circle, the window gradually blacking out as she did so.

Then, just as Phil started to turn away, the window began to brighten again until it was almost as transparent as before. He realized what must have happened. The inner pane of polarizing glass had missed its catch and revolved silently onward a few extra inches. He'd known it to happen to his own.

The girl across the way thought she was hidden. She wasn't.

She stretched and took off her coat. Phil gnawed his lip. He didn't quite want to watch her. But anything was welcome that would distract him from the thought with which his last reverie had ended, and, Phil knew very well, this window could provide most gripping, if barren, distractions.

She slowly parted the magnetic clasps on her blouse, then slipped out of it with a lithe twist of her shoulders. Phil forgot his fears, enthralled by the beauty of her dark-nippled breasts. Below them, almost cupping them, she seemed to be wearing some sort of close fitting, velvet black undergarment.

She stepped out of her skirt. The undergarment ended raggedly at her thighs. It puzzled him, perhaps because of the faint smokiness of the window. It looked almost as if it were made of some sort of fur.

Balancing expertly on one leg, she drew the stocking from the other, and along with the stocking one of those grotesque ten-inch platform shoes.

Only—and here Phil's heart jumped—she seemed to have stripped off much more than that. To be precise, her foot.

Then he saw she hadn't taken off quite all her foot. At the point where her ankle should have been, her leg curved backward a trifle, then sharply forward again, slimming down abruptly to end in a neat little black hoof.

She stripped off the other stocking and shoe with the same result. Phil could see how the foot fitted into a well in the dummy foot and the platform, and was in that way concealed.

She danced exuberantly around the room. He could hear the clicks of the little hoofs. He remembered how he'd heard her practicing tap. He could see

very distinctly her slim pasterns, her dainty fetlocks tufted with fur exactly the same texture and blackness as her “undergarments."

She stopped dancing, took up an electric razor, and began critically to shave the edge of her “undergarment."

Phil started to think in words. He got as far as “First a green cat, then—” The next moment he turned and plunged for the door.

He wasn't very clear about anything for a while after that. For instance, when he darted across the street two blocks away from the Skyway Towers he was almost run down by a slowly moving black electric, stylishly designed in the antique, museum-case style of the early 1900's. In it were sitting Cookie, the Akeleys and Swish Jack Jones with a box on his lap. Phil didn't even recognize them at the time.

All he was really conscious of was what his hand clutched in his pocket —the crumpled phonoscribe tape with Dr. Romadka's name and address.

IV

THE indicator light sped to the top of the tall column of studs, the elevator whooshed to a stop, the door opened and Phil stumbled out into a tiny foyer with carpeting like a gray lawn.

A wall—this one was female, a regular charmer—murmured, “Good evening. You have an appointment?"

“Uh,” Phil managed, rather surprised that he could speak at all.

“Do you have an appointment?” the wall repeated. “Please answer yes or no."

“Yes,” Phil said.

“May I have your name, please?"

“Phil Gish.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wondered whether he shouldn't have said Jack Jones, but after humming delicately for a moment the wall said, “How do you do, Mr. Gish. Please come in."

The wall slid open to a surrealist pear shape. Phil stepped through. A sinuous arm, slim and glittering as a serpent, sprang from beside him and indicated a nearby chair with the gracious wave of a hostess who has studied ballet.

“Will you please sit down?” the wall suggested. “Dr. Romadka will be a few secs."

Phil gulped. He had the feeling that if he strayed beyond the indicated area of the room, the arm would do quite as efficient a job as had the heavier one at the wrestling arena, although probably with an “Excuse me, please,” or even a “Now, Phil."

He took the suggestion. As if, by sinking into the chair, he had completed a circuit, the wall said, “Thank you.” He stood up. The wall said, “Yes?” with just a hint of impatience. He sat down again. “Thank you,” the wall repeated.

The room was as dark, soft and silent as a womb. Evidently most of Dr. Romadka's patients dreamed expensively. The inevitable desk had a double curve like a love seat. There were no advertisements anywhere; a sure sign of wealth. On one wall was a large, round design, apparently copied from some classical Greek original, which disturbed Phil with its suggestions of nymphs and satyrs. He quickly shifted his gaze to an arch, through which he

could see the beginning of a stairway. He decided Dr. Romadka must also have a penthouse.

Suddenly he heard angry voices, a man's and a girl's. The latter's rose to a catsquall of hate. A door somewhere shut with a snap, and a bit later a man came down the stairs without moving his feet. Phil deduced an escalator.

Dr. Romadka was tubby, bald and beaming with subtlety. He had on his left cheek four new, deep scratches, which he ignored completely and apparently expected Phil to. He summoned Phil to the desk with an indicating nod. They sat down and looked at each other across the curved and gleaming plane.

The analyst smiled. “Well, Mr. Gish? Yes, Jack Jones told me your name, and since Sacheverell and Mary are paying for things in any case, the new arrangement is quite all right. Oh, Sacheverell and Mary are Mr. and Mrs. Akeley, Jack Jones’ friends. I thought you might have known. Incidentally, you're an hour late for your appointment."

A drop of blood fell from the deepest scratch to his white shirt and spread.

Phil shivered, then made himself say it. “I was spending the time going crazy."

The analyst nodded. “You do seem a bit wrought up."

“A bit?"

“Well,” conceded the analyst with a shrug to excuse his own inadequate powers of description. Then he said, “Do not be surprised at going crazy, as you put it, Mr. Gish—may I call you Phil? It is the rule rather than the exception these days, though your admitting it is a bit out of the ordinary. For a full century now Americans have been living in one of those ages of collective madness and herd delusion, comparable only to the Dutch tulip mania, the witchcraft dread, the dancing madness, Trotskyism, and the Crusades. Until 1950 ours might have been called the Automobile Mania, but now the imagination can only grope for a name—I'm writing an unpopular book on the subject, you see. Not that this current social madness is a deep secret or anything to be startled at. What other results could have been expected when American society began to overvalue on the one hand security, censorship, an imagined world-saving idealism and self-sacrifice in war, and on the other hand insatiable hunger for possessions, fiercely

competitive aggressiveness, sadistic male belligerence, contempt for parents and the state, and a fantastically overstimulated sexuality?"

The analyst's voice rose stridently and his eyes popped, as if there were a personal element in his indignation. But the next moment he was his merry professional self.

"Now, Phil, let's examine how this sick society has sickened you. It may surprise you but we shan't be using any such modern techniques as electrosleep, deep brain photography or situational therapy complete with a bottle, a blanket and a blonde love-robot. We shall simply do what our great-grandfathers would have done—talk. Feel perfectly at ease. This desk is designed so we can be together, yet need not look at each other. Care to smoke? Good! Do! Now begin at the beginning. Tell me the story of your life."

Phil swallowed. "Excuse me, Dr. Romadka," he said, "but I'd rather not do that right now. I want to tell you about an experience, I mean, hallucination, I just had that convinced me I'm crazy, and then I want you to tell me about it. You know: interpret it or psych it or something."

The analyst shrugged happily. "As good a beginning as any. Go ahead."

So Phil told him what he had seen through the quarter-darkened window. He found himself ashamedly admitting under the analyst's expert rein-twitching how he had long used his own window as an observation post, and when he got to describing the hallucination itself he found himself trembling with restimulated terror, but he did finally get it all out.

Dr. Romadka seemed as delighted as if he had been presented with a rare object of art. "Beautiful!" he commented. "I have seldom heard so magnificent a symbol for the murky sexual longings of this culture. A satyress, or satyrette, prepared to inflict both love and savage stampings. Mary would be enraptured with it, I'm sure, and insist on making one of her dolls in its image." He sighed aesthetically, then recalled himself. "But, of course, Phil, I can't expect you to be interested just now in the artistic product of your unconscious creativity. You want to know about causes, sources. Tell me, have you ever seen a horse?"

"Once in a circus," Phil admitted.

"Greek mythology is one of your interests?"

"Not that I know of."

“Recall seeing that TV show *A Coltish Girl* or the musical sexedy *The Horsy Set* or the ancient film *Fantasia?"*

Phil shook his head. The analyst nodded thoughtfully. “You say the fur was distributed over the torso like a clinging, off the bosom chemise? And that the legs went straight down, like rods, to end in hoofs?"

“Not exactly,” Phil corrected and went on to describe the little heel bumps of the fetlocks and the slim pseudo-wrists of the pasterns.

“But otherwise she was formed exactly like a normal girl?—except for the faun ears?"

“No,” Phil said frowningly after a moment. “Her thighs were a bit heavy and powerful looking, as if made for galloping long distances. Her arms were sort of long, though it didn't occur to me then. And the upper part of her body was thrown forward a bit, if you know what I mean, and it was balanced by quite a little rump. But not what you'd call hippy."

“Magnificent!” the analyst crowed. “Phil, you not only have equipped your vision with accurate horse-legs, but you have made some of the necessary compensations in the rest of the anatomy that such a mode of locomotion would involve in a biped.” He sat there beaming a bit vacantly, as if lost in admiration for the creative powers of the all-resourceful unconscious.

“Yes, but what does it indicate about my mind?” Phil asked. He would have felt annoyed if he had not been so anxious. “What's wrong with me?"

Dr. Romadka shook off his reverie with a smile that begged pardon for it. “What's wrong with America?” he asked wryly. “It's much too early for me to arrive at any conclusions, Phil, or rather to help you arrive at your own. Of course, the visual projection created by your unconscious has some interesting references."

“What are they?” Phil asked. “I may not have made it clear but I'm worried about this. I can't get it out of my mind."

Dr. Romadka smiled, shrugged. “Perhaps a spot of interpreting would relieve you,” he agreed. “Though you must remember it's just impromptu analysis, may be quite wrong. Here goes. The first things that come to mind are such elements as dread of sexual experience and the attempt to invest it with terror, effort to feminize yourself by conceiving a savagely-hoofed love object, an attempt to link sex with a trampling and punishing beast, perhaps as serf-punishment for your voyeurism—all of these fitting in

nicely with the classical mythology about the nymphs and their natural love companions the goat-hoofed satyrs—also the horse-hoofed centaurs, who were frequently, you may remember, teachers of men." The analyst frowned. "It's barely possible you were visually projecting the desire to be taught about love. However," he went on, "I imagine that as usual the hidden significances are the more important ones. May I make a spot guess about you?"

Phil nodded.

"Are you a white-collar worker in close competition with robots?"

"Yes," Phil said, astonished.

"Hardly a brilliant deduction," the analyst deprecated, but his eyes beamed. "In that case we must suspect another mythological ingredient. Do you know the Pandora story? There's a special point about it. She was not an ordinary girl sent by the gods to bring mankind a box containing all ills. No, she was a metal maiden, forged by Hephaestus at the command of Zeus. In other words, an automaton, a robot—bringing in this case the ills of the Second Industrial Revolution caused by the introduction of electronic calculators and sensers."

"But did Pandora have hoofs?" Phil said doubtfully.

Dr. Romadka waved away the objection. "Your unconscious probably fused in the Arabian legend of the clock-work horse. The unconscious is very artistic about these things, Phil. If you realized just how artistic, how fertilely creative, you wouldn't be worried."

"But how does all this tie in with sex?" Phil asked.

The analyst shrugged. "Must it? A visual projection, like a dream, can mean a thousand things. I warned you this was just impromptu analysis. We've carried it about as far as we can."

"Look," Phil said hesitantly after a pause. "There's a lot to the things you said, and some of them really pushed buttons in my mind. But—I hope you won't object—there's one thing that's still bothering me."

"Go right ahead."

Phil became even more diffident. Finally he said with difficulty, "Look, doctor, is there any chance that what I saw could be real in any way? Any chance at all?"

The analyst chuckled mellowly. "Not one in the world," he said with complete conviction. "What's been bothering you, Phil? Did you believe

that the Greek gods and their creatures might have been materialized in some way?"

"Something like that, I guess," Phil said without conviction.

Dr. Romadka leaned toward him, resting an elbow on the curving desk. "If you had any idea of half the things people tell me across this desk, normal neurotic people I mean, you wouldn't be so much impressed by your own experience. There's a woman, for instance, who keeps seeing shimmery moon-spiders in dark corners. There's a man who is always getting glimpses of a girl dressed in skin-tight mink that covers her face, too. And there's another fellow who keeps waking up in the middle of the night with the absolute conviction that he's in bed with no, I shouldn't tell you that one."

"But I actually seemed to see it," Phil persisted stubbornly. "It wasn't just a glimpse or shadows."

Dr. Romadka smiled. "How many people have seen flying saucers, Phil? Including astronomers and atomic scientists. How many people have seen Russian soldiers or Russian homing missiles nosing around their bedroom windows? And how many people thought they saw Roosevelt—and thought they walked and talked with him—the day of the Great Panic in Atom War Two? Besides all that, Phil, there were shadows: you said the polarizing window wasn't at maximum transparency. Also, you've been overdosing yourself with sleeping pills—you admit it—and they can do funny things. As for the hoofs, well, have you ever thought how high heels are really cruel little hoofs? Anyone who's seen ladies fight will confirm this. And the girl's hair-do, her suit splotched like a piebald horse, the remembered sound of the tap dancing—don't you see how your unconscious could weave those things and a thousand more into an image that in your strained condition you were all too ready to accept?"

"I guess I do," Phil said finally, feeling considerable relief. Not for long, though.

"But there's one other thing," he said, sitting up suddenly. "The things I thought I saw this afternoon. A lot more real than the satyrette even. I thought I was with it for an hour. Even touched it and fed it."

"What other thing?" the analyst asked gently, with just the hint of a tolerant laugh.

"The green cat," Phil said.

When the analyst didn't answer, Phil looked around. Dr. Anton Romadka was simply staring at him. The four scratches and the dried trickles of blood on his left cheek stood out much more sharply, as if he had grown pale.

“I said the green cat,” Phil said.

“The green cat?” The analyst's voice was a distant echo of itself.

“Yes."

“Umm,” the analyst observed hollowly and sank farther down into his chair, almost as if he were reaching for something with his toe.

Something beeped musically. The analyst snatched up the phone. His face instantly assumed a fierce expression. He said, with pregnant pauses during which he scowled, “Yes ... No. I can't. I can't possibly, I tell you ... You couldn't do that; you'd be arrested ... Very well then, but only for five minutes. Five minutes, do you hear? I'll be waiting."

He replaced the phone and looked around at Phil with a despair that his baldness and big eyes turned comical. “This is most embarrassing,” he said. “A former patient insists on seeing me at once, threatens to cause a disturbance downstairs if I won't. She would, too. We had some fine fracases before she broke off the analysis. I have no other course but to see her. I know how to pacify her temporarily, enough to get her home."

“I'd better go,” Phil said, rising.

“Wouldn't hear of it,” Dr. Romadka protested. “I want to go much deeper into your case this evening. That last thing you mentioned—it opened vistas! No, you just wait for five minutes in the next room, ten at the most, and I'll have her out of here."

“I do think I'd better go, though,” Phil said, “if you don't mind."

“Quite impossible,” Dr. Romadka pronounced, taking a firm hold of his arm. “She's passionately jealous of all my other patients and would be sure to attack you the instant you stepped out of the elevator. Did I tell you she carries a gold squirt gun filled with sulphuric acid? That's one of her cuter tricks. The only other way out is the service chute, and that's hardly for human use. “No,” he said, guiding Phil through a door beyond the arch but not entering himself, “you just stay in here for five minutes or so. There's plenty to read, to glance over and listen to not that you'll have much time. Trust me, Phil. Everything's under control."

The door shut. One fleeting glance around showed shelves of books, racks of vocal booktapes, a divan, a central table and a large mirror set in

the ceiling. Then Phil remembered he had left his cigarettes on the desk. He punched the door button. Nothing happened. He punched it again.

There still hadn't been time for Dr. Romadka to have taken five steps away from the other side. He started to hammer on the wall.

“Dr. Romadka,” he called. “Dr. Romadka!"

The lights went out.

V

PHIL stopped pounding on the wall and the black silence closed around him drowningly, stranglingly, like a preview of the mental hospital cell and electrosleep to which, he was suddenly sure, Dr. Romadka intended to consign him on a psychiatrist's writ. In the thick darkness he heard his heart pounding. His rapid breathing was for a moment that of an animal.

He wondered helplessly why the analyst, after taking his satyrette hallucination so lightly, should have instantly typed him as a dangerous lunatic at his mention of a green cat. Psychologists, he supposed, knew things about the mind's secret language that were never told to ordinary people: seemingly innocent symbols that stamped men as cowards, rapists, murderers, traitors, crypto-communists, nonconformists. A fragment of conversation he'd heard somewhere came back to him: “Of course as soon as he saw *that* in the inkblot, they hustled him off."

There was a sharp click. He started and looked up. A tiny line of light appeared in the ceiling, widened, and then became an oblong spilling radiance on the central table below, but leaving the rest of the room dark. He realized that the mirror he'd noticed had been slid out of the way. He couldn't see much of the room above except some microfilm files and part of a TV reading machine of the sort that could use micro-libraries all over America. No human figures were visible from where he stood and he felt no desire to step forward into the revealing light. He wondered, with a certain incredulous pride, whether he was so dangerous a type that they intended to fish for him with nets. Just then a foot was dangled over the oblong's edge.

It was a charming foot, slim and clad in the most shimmeringly expensive sort of digital stocking, which gave each toe its separate translucent compartment. Running back from between the toes were four black velvet thongs, which helped attach the airy black shoe and gave it an exciting though spidery appearance. The foot was joined to a narrow ankle and gently swelling calf which hardly needed the stocking's glamorizing. That was all of the figure he could see at the moment, but the moment didn't last long. The foot was followed by a second and shortly by all the rest of the girl. She hung briefly, facing away from him. He got a quick impression of a short black evening frock; a black shoulder cape; long, dark hair

cascading free and white arms in black gloves that began above the elbows and ended at the knuckles.

His foot, shifting on the foam carpeting, made a tiny noise. Instantly she whirled on him like a black panther, complete even to the shrill snarl. As she did, Phil was rocked by two surprises: the first, revealed when her short cape spun out, that her evening frock was off the bosom, a style he had thought and read about a great deal, but that was not followed at his social level; the second, and far more attention getting, that the fingers of her right hand were tipped with clawed, silver thimbles, while in her left she held ten gleaming inches of that most disturbing anachronism, a knife. Poised like a fencer, she waggled it rapidly under his chin.

"Did my father set you to spy on me?" she demanded. The "set" and "spy" were sheer hiss.

"No," he replied chokingly, not wanting his Adam's apple to protrude.

"Then why are you here," she demanded, advancing the knife a bit, "lurking in the dark?"

"Your father locked me in," he protested, leaning backward.

"Ishtar! Is he doing that to his patients, too?" she commented. Her accents were a bit incredulous, but she did drop the knife to an easy, on guard position, which also caused her cape to fall around her modestly.

"Locked me in and turned off the lights," Phil reaffirmed.

She slitted her long-lashed eyes thoughtfully. "I can almost believe the first part of that," she said. "He often sends his patients in here for observation."

"Observation?"

She jerked a silver-fanged thumb at the ceiling. "That mirror's transparent from above. He likes to watch what his patients do when they think they're alone, either singly or by couples. Olympian voyeur! Well, I marked him tonight." And she flashed the claws, which were faintly stained with reddish brown.

Phil felt a little sick but took the opportunity to ask, "If that mirror's transparent from above, why didn't you see me when he locked me in here?"

"He always shuts the mirror off when he's not using it," she said, "and I was interested in opening it, not seeing through it. I only discovered the trick of the fastenings a half-minute ago. Father probably doesn't even know

it can be opened. Although well equipped with the nastier psychological skills, he's no mechanic."

"Well, you seem to be skillful at things all around," said Phil. "Fencing and that."

She thoughtfully licked the center of her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. "You're kind of likable in a feeble way," she said. "Why did he lock you in here anyhow? Too interested in sex? I thought he encouraged that in his patients and only tried to forbid it to his darling daughter."

As Phil searched for a suitable way to phrase a denial or confirmation, her dark eyes grew speculative. "Say," she said, "how about you and me?" She paused, then decisively whipped down the knife, so that it stuck quivering in the floor. She advanced toward Phil. "Yes, you and me."

"Your father'll be back any minute," Phil protested agitatedly.

"True, and I'll so enjoy seeing his face." She lifted her arms. "See how beautiful I am. Look at them. Like two rose buds."

She was very beautiful indeed. Nevertheless, Phil froze. She bared her teeth and struck at his cheek with her clawed hand, but at the last moment turned the blow to a contemptuous pat.

"Don't worry," she said. "I know my glamor is a sort that terrifies weaklings. Besides, the raven does not mate with the rabbit. And I only wanted to do it to spite Father. Why did he lock you in? You seem completely puerile."

"I just mentioned something about a green cat," Phil said with a certain huffiness.

She rolled her eyes. "Tammuz! And just after encouraging the Akeleys in their Bast worship. The man's so erratic I sometimes think he must be a crypto-communist with his cover personalities jumbled."

"Of course he did say something about my waiting here while he got rid of a violent ex-patient who carries around a—"

"That gold squirt gun story," she interrupted, "is his pet dodge for getting rid of patients."

"He doesn't seem to want to get rid of me."

"No," she agreed cheerfully, jerking her knife out of the floor, "he seems to want to keep you."

"I think he wants to send me to a mental hospital," Phil ventured, rather hoping to be disagreed with, but she merely nodded.

“I don't envy you,” she added, inserting the knife in a sheath in her skirt. “Father favors old-fashioned treatments like convulsive therapy and simulated snake pits. Well, if the assistant torturers are on their way, I'd better be on mine.” She took three quick steps, then looked back at him coldly, thinning her lips. “Care to come along?” she asked. “Not that I like you even faintly—I detest men; I'm seething with what my grandmother would have called masculine protest—but I always enjoy frustrating Father."

Phil had an acute sense of a lady-or-the-doctor dilemma, but he lost no time saying, “Yes."

She nodded once and headed for the back of the room. “Will you try for the elevator?” he ventured to ask.

“Of course not!” she snapped at him.

“But he said the only other way—” Phil began.

“Sshh!” she hissed and punched a door button.

The wall kept blank. “So it's on code,” she said. “I might have known.” And she punched the button in a rapid rhythm. The wall kept on blank. “Oh, oh, the special code, the one I'm not supposed to know.” She looked around at Phil. “You must be important,” she sniffed. She punched the button in another rhythm. This time, rather to Phil's surprise, the wall parted obediently. He followed her into a gleaming kitchen, complete with glassed in shelves of gamma-sterilized steaks and vegetables, freezer, radionic oven, shadowed mushroom bed and small microbe tank for home-cultured appetizers. Phil's eyes bugged at the latter two luxuries, but it did occur to him to say, “What about that mirror you left open? Mightn't your father come in upstairs and see I'm gone?"

“Not tonight after what I gave him. Now stop making old maidish remarks.” She was standing in front of a vertical cylinder that half protruded from the wall, and was busy once more with her button punching. A tiny green light flashed up a tall column of studs like a skyrocket. “Get the hassock from the library. Quick!"

When Phil hurried back lugging the foot-high cylinder of foam rubber, a doorway about as big as a midget was open in the cylinder. “Put it inside on the platform,” she directed, “on top of all the straps and stuff. They're just for packages. That's right. Now get inside and squat on it. Reach down your hands on either side of the hassock and take hold of the clamps. Keep a firm

grip, because it drops a bit faster than free-fall and you wouldn't want to be left behind squatting on nothing. And squat up straight or you'll get your head rubbed off!"

"Wait a minute," said Phil, withdrawing a foot he had gingerly inserted in the doorway, "Do you—"

"I have to go last, because I know how to work the button when I'm inside. Hurry up."

"But this is the service chute, isn't it?" he asked.

"Did you expect Nubian slaves to carry you down a spiral ramp? Later on you can persuade Father to buy me a copter if you want to."

"You mean," he quavered, "that you think I'm going to fall down that chute on a little platform without sides?"

She jerked the knife from her skirt. "I think you're going to do that or else you're going to let me lock you back in the library."

Stepping back from the knife, Phil sat down suddenly on the platform, cracking the top of his head on the doorway, and then slowly drew in his legs and assumed the position of the Anxious Buddha. "You didn't have to rush me," he said with some dignity.

"I'm sending you to the first basement," she told him in clipped tones. "I'll give you five seconds to get out. I think the door'll be open there. If not, you'll have to come up again, and hope it's me that gets you and not some other floor. Now don't worry," she told him as she slid the door shut, "I've done this a dozen times myself—or at least thought of doing it."

In the darkness Phil's spine stiffened to condensed steel and his hands clutching the clamps became those of a gorilla. He had time to think that if only Lucky were with him, tucked inside his jacket...

The platform was jerked down from under him, dragging him along. His stomach rapidly scrambled over his heart and nestled just below his Adam's apple. A giant snake hissed and he was acutely conscious of being inches from death by friction on every side. Then, just as he figured he'd got a really firm grip on the clamps, he distinctly felt the platform through the hassock, his heels cut into his rump, his vertebrae cut into his intervertebral disks, and various things inside him jarred loose.

He was staring groggily into a dimly lit and empty room. Time was passing, it occurred to him. He dove out onto the floor, while behind him the platform took off with a hearty *whish.* By the time he had dragged

himself to a sitting position and taken a few breaths there was a gust of air from the chute and a *zing* as the platform came to a stop. Miss Romadka sprang out nimbly and curtsied to an imaginary audience.

"You never did that before?" he asked her glumly.

"Of course I have, but I knew if I said I hadn't you'd take it more seriously." She tweaked him by the nearest ear. "Come on, you're not out of Father's clutches yet."

Almost to his disappointment, he found he could scramble to his feet and follow her. He almost felt calm. "How did you push the button from the inside, anyhow?"

"Just taped it down, jumped in and shut the door. The platform won't move if any of the upper-floor doors are open."

"What's your name, by the way?"

"Mitzie," she told him. "Mitzie Romadka."

"Mine's Phil," he said. "Phil Gish."

She led him into a shadowy garage, lined with ornate cars in stalls barred like prison cells. Several of the cars had recharging cables plugged in. He saw a ramp ahead that led upward. Mitzie coded the barrier in front of a small black coupe without a hint of decor.

"Innocent looking little job, isn't it?" she remarked. "Used to belong to an undertaker." She hopped in. When, with a sad shrug, Phil followed her, he was hardly surprised to find she had donned a full-length black evening-mask. 'It's not my car," she explained. "I'm just hiding it for Carstairs and the gang. It's hot."

And with that reassuring remark she guided it out toward the ramp, its small electric motor whining faintly. A door rose at her voice. Then they were outside in the ghostly yellow evening of the sodium mirror. When they had climbed almost to ground level, a big car slammed to a stop in the street ahead, three-quarters blocking the exit. Two men jumped out of the car and someone, of whom Phil could for the moment see only waddling legs and chubby tummy, hurried to meet them.

"Look, if this is another tame-chicken chase—" he heard the first of the two men from the car begin in heavy skeptical tones.

"Don't be absurd," the hurrier asserted crisply in a voice Phil recognized as Dr. Romadka's. "I tell you, he mentioned the green cat."

At that moment the analyst looked around and saw Phil gawking at him.

“There he goes now!"

The analyst's outraged squeal turned to the rasp of plastics as Mitzie bullied the small black car between the rampwall and the newcomer. With the twang of hooked bumpers parting, they swung out into the street, the little electric accelerating modestly. Phil looked over his shoulder.

“They've got back in,” he told Mitzie. “They're turning around."

“Like I said, you're important,” she murmured through her mask, still incredulously. “Well, here goes,” and she abruptly nosed the car toward the narrow mouth of a ramp leading downward.

“Hey, that's marked ‘Exit Only,'” Phil yiped at her.

“That's why I'm using it,” she informed him curtly.

He closed his eyes as the car tilted sharply down, but the gods of probability seemed inclined to grant boons tonight. When the car leveled out, Phil opened his eyes to the brighter, nearer, fog-light sodium yellow of the under level. They were moving ahead smartly. Once more Phil looked back.

“They've come down after us,” he said with wonder perhaps a trifle mixed with pride.

“Really important,” Mitzie muttered, shaking her head. “Well, this little mouse was never meant to outrace that rhino. Prepare for acceleration, and hope the cars at the next ten intersections are stacked right."

Phil felt himself crunched into the foam rubber he had his chin on. There was a red glow just behind them. The pursuing car shrank rapidly in size. Twisting himself around with difficulty, he noted that the sodium lights had become a molten yellow ribbon. Their car flew past the hood of a truck entering from a side street, though their speed made it appear to be standing still. Some blocks ahead they shot between two cars which also seemed frozen. The red glow died. They sailed up another “Exit Only” ramp into the spectral yellow night. Proceeding at a speed that soon became reasonable, they turned four successive corners.

“That should do it,” Mitzie said with professional nonchalance. Phil nodded his slumped head.

“Carstairs put in the rocket assist yesterday,” she explained. “He wasn't altogether sure he had it lined up right. Neat little trick, isn't it? A great comfort when you've just knocked over a fat sales robot, say, and have three

cop cars converging and maybe a cop copter up above. Beats a smoke screen all hollow. You'll see."

"I have," Phil assured her with a rather absentminded shiver.

"That was nothing," she said scornfully. "I mean when you've really pulled a job and they're closing in. That's the big thrill. You'll see, I tell you. You know, Phil, I sort of like you. You're so darn scared and innocent, yet you play along. I'm sure I can persuade Carstairs to let you join the gang."

Phil shivered again, but with even less of his mind on it. Neither Mitzie Romadka's criminal pastimes nor her sudden friendliness could hold his attention. Staring out frowningly at the jaundiced street, he was thinking of Lucky and of the way he had felt when Lucky was with him.

He jerked awake. "What is this green cat, anyhow?" Mitzie was asking with an indifference that her mask intensified. "A carved emerald or the password in a secret society?"

Phil shrugged.

"Well, let's forget it then," Mitzie was saying, "and have some fun." She speeded up again to the electric's unassisted limit and ran through a stop light which yipped protestingly. Her eyes gleamed wickedly in their circles of black lace. Her breathing grew quicker, her voice lighter. "Carstairs has a bunch of sales robots lined up. Got their after theater routes cased to a hair. We can ram 'em and gut 'em, one, two, ten! Jump for the curb, sisters!"

This last exuberant remark was directed at two cloaked women on glittering platforms, and it was accompanied by a vicious swerve of the car toward them. They made it, just, and tumbled on their knees, shrieking. Mitzie cooed happily.

Like someone waking from a dream, Phil said sharply "No! I don't want any part of it!" He went on, "You can drop me at 3010 Opperly Avenue, top level."

She looked at him curiously for a change, even with surprise. "All right," she said after a bit, "I'll do it, if only because I got such a kick out of the look on your face when I shut the door of the chute." She spun the car illegally in a tight U-turn. She said harshly, not looking at Phil, "I never hot rod at old people, you know. They don't have enough hormones to make it fun. Those two girls were real funnies."

Phil made no comment. They sped for a while in silence. Then he became vaguely aware that Mitzie was stealing glances at him.

“If you should manage to cook up a little nerve and change your mind,” she said angrily, “you might possibly find us at the Tan Jet much later tonight."

He still made no comment. She went on softly, “Night's the only time, you know, at least in this century. Night in the city. I love the pale yellow streets and the bright yellow tunnels. They've taken the jungles away from us, the high seas and the highways, even space and the air. They've abolished half of the night. They've tried to steal danger. But we've found it again in the city; we who've got nerve and hate the sheep!

“Well, here's your 3010 Opperly,” she said, jerking the car to a stop. Phil opened the door and started out. Only then did Mitzie seem to see the bright marquee and realize that the address was that of Fun Incorporated's wrestling center. She thrust herself across the seat as he reached the curb and turned to shut the door.

“So this is what you were looking for!” she yelled at him, her suddenly passionate voice making her mask puff away from and then huff to her mouth. “You turn me down, you sniff at my friends and my ways, you're above violence and sex, and all the while you're planning to satisfy yourself vicariously, watching male-female!” For an instant before she slammed the door in his face, lightning seemed to shoot out of the lace-shirred eyeholes of the black mask. “At least I make my own thrills, you rotten little virgin!"

VI

THE crowd pouring down the corridor squeezed out of Phil his wincing recollection of Mitzie's last crack. He slithered his way along the wall, rubbed by shoulder and hip, trodden by heel and toe, set coughing by gray-blue clouds of tobacco, weed, and so-called Venus weed, and regaled by such remarks as, “Aaha, he could of thrown her any time he wanted to,” and “What I don't like are those dumb women referees!"

Phil finally wedged his way into an eddy of the crowd near a side corridor. He unhopefully gasped, “Juno Jones.” Old Rubberarm whispered throatily, “Come right in, Mack,” and narrowly arched his gray arm to let Phil duck through at that point, meanwhile bracing his slaty length against a general surge of the crowd and whipping back the tentacle-end of his arm to stop a gent in brown with tennis-ball eyes who tried to duck in after Phil.

Phil wiped his forehead and took a deep breath. He felt a little giddy standing just by himself. A woman came out of the door ahead. She was dressed with an aggressive dowdiness: shapeless long frock, button shoes, wide brimmed flower covered hat, fur neckpiece and gloves. She looked like somebody's scrubwoman from past times out on a half-holiday. He didn't realize who it was until the crowd behind him began to cheer and to chant, “Juno! Juno!"

She waved to them, but her eyes were on Phil.

“Gosh, I'm glad to see you,” she said, grabbing his elbow. Then she whispered, “Don't ask questions. Come with me."

The next moment she was hurrying him down the corridor away from the crowd.

The chanting of the crowd became disappointed and a bit sore. A shrill voice skirled over it: “Whatcha goin’ off with the little shrimp for?"

Juno turned around and stood solid. “Listen, you mugs,” she bellowed, and the crowd was silent while a telephoto spot glowed blindingly. “I know I'm your heroine and it makes me happy, but even I gotta have a love life! And don't you be insulting it!"

As the crowd yelped with laughter and started cheering again, Juno pushed Phil through a door. “I hope you didn't mind my saying that,” she told him. “They're my fans and I gotta humor ‘em."

Phil shook his head a bit dazedly. He had expected her to stop as soon as they got out of sight of the crowd, but instead she was hurrying him along a narrow hall.

“Say, look here, Mister—” she began anxiously.

“Phil,” he told her. “Phil Gish."

“Well, look, Phil, could I take you to dinner?"

“Sure,” Phil said.

“Good,” she said with relief. Nevertheless she kept peering about, almost apprehensively, and didn't slacken their pace. “I know a good steak place. Quiet and they really know how to broil rabbit.” They reached a narrow, shadowy stairway. Juno steered him toward it. He started up, but she jerked him back. “Not that way, Phil, for gosh sake,” she warned him. “That's straight to Billig and the wasps. This place I'm telling you about is on the bottom level.” And she started down. “We could take an elevator,” she said apologetically, “but this is better,” adding gruffly, “more private."

At the bottom of the stairs a narrow door led directly into a long dark room with a counter along one side and a row of booths along the other. With its browned chrome finishes it had to date back to 1960. The customers were truckdrivers, police, and a less definable category. There was an elevator door next to the one they'd come out of. Juno wagged her big hand at a couple of people and shouted to someone, “Whiskey and chops, and make sure you burn the edges. What'll you have, Phil?"

He realized he hadn't eaten since yesterday and mumbled something about a yeast sandwich and a glass of soybean milk. She looked at him, but passed on his order without a comment, then took him in tow once more. She had to answer a few familiar greetings, but she didn't spend much time on them and seemed relieved when she'd plunked Phil down in the booth nearest the front door, where the rumble of trucks was loudest and their headlights, mixed with the sodium glow, flashed on the scratched and dusty glastic. But there were, for a wonder, no jukeboxes or radios of any sort in the place. He also saw that the pushbuttons on the wall were labeled for out of date synthetic foods and had taped over them an “Out of Order” sign that must have been twenty years old itself.

He studied his companion across the table and realized for the first time that she looked dead beat. His glance began to trace on her large jaw the outlines of a recent bruise that was only partly concealed by hastily applied

makeup. She dove into her pocketbook with a shy girl's flusteredness and started to dab at her jaw with a powder-puff, but then gave up, put back the puff and slumped forward, her meaty elbows on the plastic.

"Don't ever let 'em tell you the bouts are fixed," she assured him glumly. "Zubek bust a gut trying to get me tonight."

"You won?" Phil inquired.

"Oh, sure. Two falls, a spaceship spin and a free-fall—that means when you throw 'em up and out and they don't come back."

A tray came sliding along the bar. Juno went over and got it before Phil realized that it was for them. From the speed with which the order had been filled, he decided they still had radionic cooking in the place. Juno's seared rabbit chops were as big as small steaks—it must have been an octoploid bunny, at the least—while her whiskey was intimidatingly huge and brown. He nibbled his yeast sandwich and found it seemingly okay, though it always made him a bit uneasy to eat restaurant food that didn't pop out of a wall.

As Juno munched her chops and drank her whiskey, she told Phil snatches of the story of her life. It turned out she was a farm girl who had come to the city young and suffered the usual disillusionments. "How's a girl going to get ahead these days," she asked Phil, "especially a dumb ox like me? Not that I didn't have a swell figure, but even then I was too big and strong. I scared the men I knew and I didn't know then the ones who would have liked what I had. So I tried scrub mothering for a while—you know, birthing babies for wealthy dames who didn't want to carry them the nine months themselves—but I knew there was no future in that. Ten years or so and I'd be sweeping up after some sweeping robot and trying to make throwaway paper dresses last a month. So I remembered how I could pin nine out of ten boys back home, and I entered some amateur wrestling contests and pretty soon they were grooming me for a pro." She shook her head dourly. "You should have seen my figure; it really was beautiful before they put me on hormones." She distastefully inspected her big hands, still white gloved though now gravy stained. "Even used pituitrin on me, the bastards." She sighed and shrugged. By now she had reduced her chops to bones and was working on her second whiskey. "So that's the way it was, Phil. Of course, I had to go and fall in love with a wrestler and marry the

little skunk—most of the girls in the business make that mistake—but at least I eat rabbit, even beef, and a lot of dopes respect me."

Phil nodded eagerly. “You've made a place for yourself. Security."

“Are you kidding?” she asked. “Five years and I'll be through, ten at the outside if I get to be a character.” She shook her head and leaned forward. “Actually it's much worse than that. Male-female's almost finished. Government's going to crack down."

“They always say that,” Phil reassured her with timid cheeriness, “and it never happens."

She shrugged fatalistically. “This time it will."

“I heard the president talking about something like that tonight,” Phil said, “but he sounded drunk."

She shrugged.

“But Fun Incorporated is supposed to have all sorts of connections with the government,” Phil continued to object.

She smiled oddly. “You're right. The best connections any syndicate ever had. Just the same, they're finished. Moe's been worried for weeks, worried bad. I can tell."

“Moe?"

“Moe Brimstine. You saw him for a minute this afternoon."

“Oh, yes,” Phil said, getting a vivid memory flash of the door-filling, dark jowled hulk, and then went on with a little laugh, “You know, it startled me when his voice was the same as Old Rubberarm's. He seemed too important a man to be a door-tender."

“I'll say he is!” she exclaimed, the boom returning to her voice for a moment. “You didn't actually think, Phil, did you, that he spent his time peeking through a one-way peephole and working that spring-rubber dingus? And would I be calling him a dumb robot? He just used his own voice to record Old Rubberarm's questions and answers. He gets a kick out of things like that.” She lifted her heavy eyebrows. “Don't you know who Moe Brimstine is?"

Phil shook his head.

“Where you been all your life? ‘Scuse me, Phil, but Moe Brimstine is ... why, he's on top of the syndicate, right next to Mr. Billig himself!"

When Phil didn't recognize the second name either, she quit trying. “Well, anyway, Phil,” she said in her friendly, quiet voice, “there's Moe Brimstine,

practically the boss of Fun Incorporated, which runs wrestling and amusement centers, all sales-robots, jukebox burlesque, and a lot of other things they don't talk so much about. And he's worried, real worried. Now I know Moe. He don't worry about nothing but the syndicate. So things must be real bad." She paused, then added cryptically, but with a sort of personal gloominess, "Lots of things are real bad."

Phil nodded. There was a silence.

"Say, Phil," she finally said huskily, watching her big, gravy stained finger rub her near empty glass. "That really was a—whadya call it?—delusion, wasn't it, this afternoon when you was talking about a green cat?"

"I thought so then," Phil said softly. "Now I'm not sure."

She let out a big breath and looked up at him. "You know," she said with sudden warmth, "neither am I. Say Phil, how valuable is that cat, anyway, if there is a cat? Could it be worth $10,000?"

Phil felt his eyes bug at the same instant he was thinking that Lucky's worth could never be measured in money. "$10,000?" he murmured. "I haven't the faintest idea. What made you think of that figure?"

"Well," Juno said slowly, "after the Akeley's—muck 'em!—had left this afternoon, Jack came in to me and started talking again about how dumb I was about you. Only this time it wasn't because I had let you in, but because I'd let you go. He says to me, 'You're dumb, Juno, you're deductively dopey. You don't recognize opportunity. Now I'm in a position to make $10,000 out of that little squirt, only I'm not going to do it, at least not right away,' he says, 'because there are higher things, Juno, there are higher things.'" And she rolled her eyes as if she were in the ring and approaching her spouse in his character of Swish Jack Jones, the Lady Killer.

"Well, anyway," she went on after a moment in a less outraged voice, "I didn't wonder too much about that at the time, 'cause he's always trying to needle me that way since he met Sashy (Jack hates me to call him that) Akeley. But then, just after I get out of the ring tonight, Moe Brimstine starts pumping me about a green cat. Seems he'd been playing Old Rubberarm's recordings of his conversations for the afternoon, and I'd talked about a green cat when I was talking to you. He pretended it was what you call idle curiosity, but that's something Moe Brimstine's got nothing of. Course I told him you were just a harmless nut with cats in your bonnet, but he didn't seem satisfied." She looked at Phil puzzledly. "You did

think you were a nut this afternoon, didn't you? You didn't believe in any green cat then—I mean, after we'd argued you out of it?"

Phil had to nod.

"But now you've changed your mind?"

"Yes, I have. You see, I finally took your husband's advice and went to see the analyst."

"That lousy psycher the Akeleys put him onto!" she snorted.

Phil sketched the essentials of his episode with Dr. Romadka. When he had finished, Juno burst out, "I get it all right. If he locks you up and calls in some hoods and they demagnetize the law tape chasing you, then that green cat's no weed dream, brother!"

"They didn't look like hoodlums," Phil objected doubtfully. "Besides, Miss Romadka didn't seem to think the green cat was important."

"That sexy little she-punk!" Juno dismissed Mitzie contemptuously.

Phil was startled—he hadn't realized he'd told Juno so much about Mitzie.

"Besides," Juno went on conclusively, "Moe's interested in the green cat, or he wouldn't pump me about it, and anything Moe's interested in has gotta be real. Oh, the poor little mutt."

"Who, Moe?" Phil asked confusedly.

"Course not. I mean Jack, specially after Moe catches up with him and finds he had that green cat and then didn't deliver." Her brow furrowed excitedly. "Look, Phil, this is the way I figger it: Moe tells Jack and some of the other punks, 'Boys, I'm paying $10,000 to anybody who brings me a green cat.' $10,000 is Moe's favorite figger dealing with smart jerks like Jack."

"But why would Moe Brimstine want a green cat?" Phil objected. "Did you ask him tonight when he was pumping you?"

"Brother, you don't ask Moe Brimstine anything," Juno assured him.

"But you do think now that your husband and Cookie stole the green cat while Old Rubberarm was keeping me out?"

Juno's look implied he stated the obvious far too often.

"Has Mr. Brimstine been asking your husband questions?" Phil asked.

"Jack wasn't billed for tonight," Juno explained. "He went off somewhere."

"To the Akeleys'?" Phil asked, a blurred memory nudging at his mind.

“This isn't the night,” Juno said. Her voice became for a moment bitterly mincing. “They only receive wunct a week! Most likely Jack's gone off with Cookie somewhere."

“But if your guess is right about Mr. Brimstine offering $10,000 for a green cat, and Jack stole the cat, then why hasn't he taken it to him?"

Juno rolled her head like an angry bull. “Oh, it'd be something those Akeleys put him up to; something they flattered him into. Maybe they even got him to give them the cat. They can really twist him."

Phil felt all at sea again. “But what would the Akeleys want with the cat?"

“What do screwballs like that want with anything?” Juno countered. “What do they want with Jack?” She snuffed and looked at Phil. “Get one thing straight,” she said gruffly, “I love Jack, the little rat. I've taken a lot from him, but I haven't minded too much. Oh, it hurt when I found out he thought more of Cookie and those other punks than he did for me, but I didn't let it show through my skin. After all, if a man knows you can lick him, I suppose it's bound to affect him. But when those Akeleys discovered him and began to play up to him and change him, that was too much for me. They're intelleckchuls, you see, and they flattered Jack and filled him up with a lot of gux about how he had a hidden artistic talent and how he was Zeus or some name like that battling the female principle and so on. Well, he falls for it see?—goes into a complete free-fall. Starts to buy reading tapes, printed books even! Next thing he's insulting me—using a lot of words I never hardly heard of. Keeps talking about how great Mary is, with her art and her magic figures or whatever they are, and how wonderful Sashy is, with his great ideas about understanding and love and a lot of other junk. Tells me to my face that I'm a dumb bell, a stupe semantically!” And having done well with that last word, Juno slugged down the rest of her drink. “Look, Phil,” she went on, “I could fight Cookie and the others, because they're on my level, but I can't fight intelleckchuls. They're lifting Jack away from me and I can't do nothing about it. And now they've done and got him into some real trouble, I bet, with this green cat business. Because Moe Brimstine isn't impressed with intelleckchuls or anything.” She carefully took the glass out of her hand and made claws. “If I had the little rat here,” she said, “I'd strangle some sense into him. But until Moe Brimstine talked to me, I didn't really suspicion anything was wrong, and now I can't do nothing."

Phil's blurred memory suddenly came clear. He told Juno about how, racing to Dr. Romadka's, he had seen Jack, Cookie, Sacheverell, and Mary driving somewhere in the ancient electric.

Juno slammed the table with both fists. People looked around. “That black hearse-box!” She roared. “I should have known it. Tonight's so important they're receiving special.” She jumped up and grabbed Phil by the wrist, fumbled for her glass, got Phil's instead, recognized it just before draining the last of the soybean milk, set it down with a shudder and yanked Phil out of the booth. “Come on,” she told him. “We're going to the Akeleys! To the temple!"

Opening the doorway leading to the sub-street, Juno had to pause. Phil got a chance to look back the long length of the bar. As he did, the elevator door at the far end opened. A fat form filled it. Dark glasses were twin patches of smut.

At that moment, Phil got an unannounced demonstration of Juno Jones’ strength. He was lifted off his feet and lightly swung some ten feet through the doorway into the sub-street roaring and glaring with trucks.

“That was Moe Brimstine,” Phil gasped.

“I know,” Juno told him as she yanked him toward the escalator leading to higher levels and cab phones. “He didn't see us."

Phil wasn't so sure.

VII

THE cab had just hummed past Monstro Multi-Products' blindingly bright basement show windows, behind which a file of dress display robots marched in an endless figure eight with considerable realism and oodles of suede-rubber glamor, when Juno hunched forward and growled to the driver to stop. She had been silent during most of the ride, as if the whiskey had gone sour in her, and now when Phil made a move to pay she impatiently motioned him aside. He hopped out willingly enough, suddenly eager to see what the Akeley place looked like, as if his hopes and fears had started rotating again when the wheels of the cab stopped.

Juno's reference to "the temple" had half led him to expect Greek columns or an Egyptian portal. Instead he was facing an oblong of darkness, framed by the sidewalk, show windows some distance to either side, and the underpinnings of the two upper streets. He crossed the sidewalk and hesitated, as if he stood on the edge of nothingness. It was really very black, even for the bottom level. The sodium moon had set.

Then, as the after effects of the show window's glare lessened, a house took shape before him—an old, three story house, looking incredibly as if it were built of wood, with roofs slanting oddly and lights gleaming faintly through shuttered bay windows and fanciful dusty fanlights. Something gritted under his foot and he realized that between him and the house was a yard of real dirt, if not grass and weeds. This must have been the ground level of the city some hundred years ago. Now it was the windows of the third story which peered across the gap at the top-level street far above Phil's head. The gap was at one point spanned by a beam. Apparently the house was so ancient and rickety that it needed props.

But then a new illusion presented itself. Phil knew that the house was in the heart of the city, hemmed in by gigantic buildings on every side. There should have been tiers of lighted windows and, far overhead, a square of night sky. Instead there was only darkness, as if the pre-atomic house existed in a private night.

Then headlights of a turning car in the street two levels above swept across the upper third of the house, and he saw that all around the house

were surfaces painted a dull, non-reflecting black. The flat black “ceiling” could hardly be a foot above the top of the house's highest spire.

“Some legal business,” Juno explained, coming up beside him. “Jack wunct told me sumpin about it. Seems the original owners couldn't be rooted out, but the city seized the air-rights and built over them. Creepy place, looks as if it were about to rot apart—just right for those Akeleys.” Then, more loudly, “Well, I said I was going to bust in on them, and I am. C'mon."

Phil followed her across the yard to the rickety steps leading to the porch. His hand groping for the rail touched peeling ancient paint. Halfway up a cat darted past him. For a moment he was swallowing his heart, then as the cat paused at the top he saw that it was splotched with some sort of dark and light colors—hardly Lucky. It loped around a corner of the porch. Following it, Phil and Juno found themselves facing a six-paneled door lit by a dingy globe, which Phil guessed must be an ancient tungsten-filament lamp. There was no sign of the cat, or indication of how it could have vanished, until Phil noticed a tiny and possibly swinging door cut in the bottom of the big one.

Ignoring a cat-headed knocker, green with verdigris, Juno pounded on the door in a way that made Phil hunch his shoulders and duck his head, keeping an apprehensive eye on the ceiling. But the house didn't collapse.

After a time a peephole opened above the knocker and a watery gray eye surveyed Juno.

“I want to see that no-good husband of mine,” she shouted, but it didn't seem her usual self-confident roar.

“Now Juno, you're all upset,” came the response in a voice Phil recognized as that of Sacheverell Akeley. “Your aura's all muddy; I can hardly see you through it."

“Listen here,” Juno bellowed, “you let me in or I'll bust your lousy house down."

Phil thought that, even granting some lack of certainty in Juno, this was not a threat to be taken lightly, but it didn't faze Sacheverell. “No, Juno,” he said firmly. “I can't let you in when your vibrations are like that, and when hate hormones are streaming off you. Later perhaps—then we may even be able to help you achieve inward tranquility—but not now."

“But look,” Juno complained in surprisingly docile tones, “I got a friend with me that's got business with you.” She stepped aside.

“What business?” Sacheverell asked skeptically.

Phil looked straight at the oysterish eye and said, “The green cat."

The door swung back and Sacheverell, now no longer in orange beret and pants, but a robe of bronze embroidered green, waved Phil in with an arm that swished emerald silk. His sunburn now seemed the exotically dark complexion of an Asian mystic. “All doors must open to him who speaks that name,” he said simply. “Do you vouch for your companion's peacefulness?"

“Ah, I wouldn't touch anybody or anything here,” Juno growled surlily, shouldering in after Phil. “I feel smutched enough already."

“From filth the roses spring, Juno,” Sacheverell reminded her gently, “and good blooms from evil. Be happy that you are to share in the great transformation."

Phil found himself standing on the threshold of a large living room twisting with streams of gray incense and cluttered with Victorian furniture and a bric-a-brac of ornaments and objects suggesting every religion in the world. The lights here, too, were tungstens, and so few as to make many shadows. At the far end of the room was a large doorway, heavily curtained with black velvet. Through the resinous odor of incense came the dull reek of stale food, clothes and people; also a sour animal smell.

And then Phil saw that the place was simply alive with cats: black, white, topaz, silver, taupe; striped, mottled, banded, pied; short haired, Angora, Persian, Siamese and Siamese mutant. They dripped from chair tops and shelves; they peered brightly from under little tables and dully from suffocating-looking crevices between cushions; they pattered about or posed sublimely still. One stretched full length on the woven Koran in the center of a Moslem prayer rug; another lay on a tarnished silver pentacle inlaid in a dark, low table. One was battling a phylactery hanging from the wall, making the little leather box swing and jump; another was nosing a small steatopygous, multi-mammiferous figurine; yet another was lazily entangling itself in a rosary; two were lapping dirty looking milk from a silver chalice set with amethysts.

And then for a second time Phil was gulping his heart, for in the center of a mantelpiece over a real fireplace, and midway between a gilded icon and

a tin Mexican devil-mask, there posed most sublimely still of all, with forelegs straight as spears ... the green cat.

As Phil walked hypnotically forward, he heard Sacheverell say gently, “No, that is not his true self, but his simulacrum, his ancient Egyptian harbinger, a figure of Bast, the Lady of Life and Love."

And as Phil came closer, he saw it truly was the bronze statue of a cat, encrusted with verdigris almost exactly the hue of Lucky's coat. Coming up beside him, Sacheverell explained, “As soon as *he* came, I routed out all our relics of Bast. Most of them are in there,” he indicated the black velvet curtains, “around the altar. But a few are here.” And he pointed out, beside the bronze statue, a small mummy case and inside it the linen-banded mummy of a cat, looking like a little sack with a blob at the top. As Sacheverell was explaining the tiny Canopic jar of preserved cat entrails beside it, a six-toed Siamese wandered up and sniffed the mummy thoughtfully.

Finally Phil found his voice. “Then you actually do have Lucky?"

Sacheverell's high curved eyebrows curved still higher. “Lucky?"

“The green cat,” Phil added.

Sacheverell's face grew serenely grave. “No one has the green cat,” he reproved Phil. “It would not be permitted. He has us. We are his humble worshippers, his primal hierophants."

“But I want to see him,” Phil said.

“That will be permitted,” Sacheverell assured Phil, “when he wakes and the world changes. Meanwhile, compose yourself, er ... Phil Gish, you say? Phil ... philo ... love ... an auspicious name."

“Why the mucking hell is this green cat so important, anyhow? What is it?"

The two men turned. Juno was still standing on the threshold. She was swayed forward a little, hugging her elbows, yet had her shoulders squared and was glaring at them surlily, like a rebellious schoolgirl.

“The green cat is love,” Sacheverell told her softly. “The love that blossoms even from hate."

There was another interruption. This one took the form of a coy, girlish snicker. Phil turned to the side of the room he had not yet inspected closely, the one facing the fireplace. In it was a deep, wide bay window closely shuttered with gray jalousies, as were all the other windows in the room

except for one fronting on darkness beside the fireplace. In the bay was a semicircular couch on which Mary Akeley sprawled adolescently, still in black sweater and stiff, red skirt.

"You know," she said, "I just can't get used to the idea of loving everything. Sacheverell says I've got to be nice to my little people and stop sticking hatpins in them and things, but it's hard."

For a morbid moment Phil thought she was referring to the cats. Then he saw that there were a series of narrow shelves behind her, starting at the top of the couch and going halfway up the bay and that these shelves were crowded with dolls. Moving closer, he saw they were not ordinary dolls, but extremely realistic human figures, most of them about six inches high. He had never seen dolls so perfectly formed or realistically dressed. There must have been two or three hundred. They stood behind Mary like the cross-section of a crowded three-level street in some tiny living world. In front of the couch was a low table crowded with blocks of wax, molds, micro-tools and magnifiers, several partially completed figurines and piled squares of fabrics so delicate they must have been woven specially.

"You like my little people?" he heard Mary ask him. "Most everyone does. I got started out making striptease dolls, but these that are all my own are so much more fun. Sacheverell, I think they like having pins stuck through them. I think that's the way they want to be loved."

"Perhaps, my dear," Phil heard Sacheverell say with an affectionate chuckle, "but we'll have to wait to see how *he* feels about it."

And then Phil saw that the dolls represented actual individual people, were apparently perfect statuettes of them—so perfect that for a moment he found himself wondering which was the real world: the big one or this tiny one of Mary's. He recognized President Barnes, the USSR's Vanadin, square-jawed John Emmet of the Federal Bureau of Loyalty, several TV and handie stars, Sacheverell, about eight versions of Mary herself, Jack Jones in black tights, Juno in maroon ones, Dr. Romadka and—he caught his breath—Mitzie Romadka in an evening frock very much like the one he'd seen her wearing.

"Recognizing friends?" Mary asked softly, her young face which was so predominantly nose and chin poking up inquisitively toward his.

Footsteps clumped. Phil realized that Juno had finally come into the room and was standing behind him looking at the dolls. Mary looked past him

with an innocent smile. “They're awfully cute, aren't they?” she remarked.

Juno said, “Ugh!"

“Try to be joyful,” Sacheverell kindly admonished with a little wag of his finger. “Try hard. Soon it will be ever so much easier. I mean, when *he* wakes. I must go now and see if there has been any change. Amuse yourselves.” And having lightly set them that stupendous task, he hurried from the room, his green robes whistling against the black velvet curtains.

“Sacheverell's been as efficient as can be ever since *he* came,” Mary observed. “A great little manager. I've never seen him so peppy before about anything. He's gone in for other things, you know,” she prattled on. “Semantic Christianity, neo-Mithraism, Bhagavad-Gita, Gospel according to St. Isherwood, Bradburian Folkism, Cretan Triple-Goddess, devil worship and Satanism—those are the two that *I* like—and I don't know what all else. Every time he finds himself a new one, he gets very enthusiastic, but not like this. I've never seen him so serious. Ever since Jack handed him the green cat, all cute and curled-up and sleeping—”

“It wasn't sleeping,” Phil cut in almost sharply. “It had been knocked out by a stun-gun."

“Don't be ridiculous,” Mary went on. “Jack just found him sleeping. Well, as soon as Sacheverell touched him, Sacheverell told us that the world was going to change and there was going to be a new era of love and understanding, and ever since then he's been as busy as a little bee. Soon as we got home, he whirled around and got out all the Bast things. I told Sacheverell that because Bast was a lady goddess, maybe we shouldn't call him *he.* But Sacheverell told me no, that was the way it was and the way it had to be. And I guess maybe he's right, because when Sacheverell carried him through here sleeping, all the little cats went for him in a big way, and the little girl cats went for him even more than the little boy cats. And anyway, I always trust Sacheverell's notions because he's so good at esping and telepathing that he makes half our living by it."

At that moment there was a strangled grunt and Phil heard the clumping begin again behind him. Mary smiled slyly and followed Juno with her eyes, but kept on babbling.

“And you know,” she said, “I guess there is something to what Sacheverell says about an era of love and understanding, because these little cats used to fight all the time, but ever since *he's* been in the house they've

been as peaceful as anything—a regular little cat UN without Russia and the satellites. Even I feel sweeter, which is a real test, though it's going to break my heart not to be able to hate people." She sighed. "Still, if everybody's going to have to love people, I'll just have to face it, and I better start practicing right now."

Phil, who had been leaning toward her, jerked up at that. Her face was just a bit too like a young crone, despite her inviting lips and creamy skin, but she merely reached behind her and took down the doll of Juno. "Even love *her,"* she said.

The footsteps changed direction and came stamping up. Juno's face was brick red from rage or outraged modesty.

"You put me down!" she demanded. "I know what you are, you're a witch. There was one on the next farm back in Pennsylvania. Only witches make wax dolls of people and stick pins in them."

For answer Mary gave the figurine an affectionate stroke. "No, Juno, I'm going to have to love you and you're going to have to get used to it." She looked up sweetly at Juno, who writhed at every touch Mary gave the figurine. "Incidentally, I really am a witch and if I had any choice, I would much rather stick needles through you."

"Put me down!" Juno bellowed, raising her arms with all the muscles standing out tautly underneath the long, tight sleeves of her dress, as if she had a big rock she was going to drop on Mary.

Mary complied without haste and took down another of the figurines. Her voice was soft as a serpent gliding. "Would you rather I practiced loving on Jack? That's what you make me do."

"Don't you touch him!" Juno's face was almost purple. "Bad enough your going all gooey over him in the flesh, but this is worse. Stop touching him that way! Aaaaah!"

Phil ducked back as, with the last screaming bellow, Juno kicked the work table to one side so that its contents scattered and all the cats went scampering under tables and chairs. "I'm going to smash every last one of those dolls," Juno announced, advancing.

Instantly Mary rose to her knees on the couch, her back to her little people, her arms outstretched protectingly to either side.

"Straight through the eyes," she hissed, her face a fury's mask, "that's where *your* needles are going. Get thee before me, Satan!"

Phil never found out whether Juno was, as she seemed, a bit cowed by the diabolical venom in Mary's voice, for just then there was a frantic padding of feet on the stairs and Jack Jones and Cookie burst into the room from the hall.

"Juno!" Jack yelled. "I told you I'd kill you if you ever came here!"

In the ensuing moment of silence Cookie could be heard to confirm primly, "He will, too."

Juno turned on Jack, assuming the stance of a bear. "Listen, you ten-timing little stinker, you're going straight home with me." She hitched up her skirt and began to roll up, or rather rip up, the long sleeves of her frock. Her furpiece had already fallen off and her hat hung by a cropped hair.

Meanwhile Jack was surveying the scene and getting a real idea of how much damage had been done.

"Juno," he said aghast, but advancing, "you've been wrecking the place, you've been wrecking the little people, you even brought the Ikeless Joe!" And in passing he gave Phil a shove that sent him up against the wall, his teeth rattling. "Don't you see what you've done, Juno?" Jack continued with poignantly aggrieved indignation, as if he must convince Juno of the enormity of her actions before liquidating her. "You've done the one thing they won't ever forgive, the one thing that'll turn 'em against even me." He was practically tearful. "Don't you realize they're the only two people in the world that mean anything to me? Don't you realize that outside of Mary and Sacheverell, I don't care a fig for anybody?"

Surprisingly to Phil, the retort to this came not from Juno, who was lifting her now bare arms menacingly, but from Cookie.

"Oh, so you don't care anything about me, either," he accused shrilly. "I've suspected it for a long time, and now you say it yourself."

"Shut up, you're just a dumb stooge," Jack told him without looking around.

"Oh, so I'm just a dumb stooge, am I? Well let me tell you, Jackie, Juno's right about one thing and I wish I'd admitted I agreed with her long ago. These Akeleys have turned your head. They've dazzled you."

At that moment Sacheverell came popping back into the room, his brilliant silk robes fairly hissing against the black velvet. "Stop, at once!" he commanded, raising his arm. "You will disturb *his* awakening. Rise

above hate. Do you realize I can't see anything of you but ink blobs, your auras are so black? Even *he* will be unable to reach you."

"Shut up that silly talk about *he,"* Cookie snarled. "I don't want to hear the word again or anything more about your stupid cults that I had to pretend to be interested in. You've done Jackie quite enough damage as it is. Do you know we could have got *ten thousand dollars* for that cat you're using for your idiotic mumbo-jumbo? Jack had just stun-gunned it and was all ready to hand it over to Moe Brimstine and collect *ten thousand dollars,* when you have to prance in with that *ugly* witch of a wife of yours and make like a wizard and flatter Jackie into thinking he was starting a new religion or something and soft talk him into giving you the cat. I hate you. I want to hurt you." And he started toward Sacheverell, walking on his toes and puffing out his sweatered chest like a bright blue fighting cock.

Once again to Phil's surprise, Sacheverell's horrified and reproachful gaze was turned not on Cookie, but Jack.

"Jack," he gasped, "do you mean to tell me you shot *him* with a stun-gun, that you even dreamed of selling *him* for money? Judas!"

"Now see what you've done," Jack moaned, not at Cookie, but at Juno. "You've spoiled everything."

"I'll spoil you, you rancid little intelleckchul-lover," she roared and ran at him blindly like a novice. Jack's face set itself in a shrewd grimace and he stepped lightly to one side and slipped out a hand for a hold. But just then Juno's professional training seemed to come back to her and she checked herself, smoothly grabbed the wrist of the hand snaking toward her, bent, spun, and sent Jack sailing over her hip in a flying mare that landed him on the silver pentacled table. It toppled with a crash and various religious objects fell from the wall.

Meanwhile, Mary Akeley had picked up a small vise that had broken from her upset work table, and hurled it with great accuracy at Cookie's head, but then Cookie suddenly hurled himself at Sacheverell's throat and the vise passed through the space where Cookie's head had been.

While all this was going on, Phil, completely to his surprise, walked coolly over to the shelves of figurines, carefully picked up that of Mitzie, and put it in his jacket pocket.

When he turned around, Jack had selected a black glass Aztec sacrificial knife from the fallen religious objects and writhed to his knees like a cobra.

Juno picked up a rather small, but very solid, brass Buddha.

Nearer the velvet curtains, Cookie had Sacheverell on his back and was choking him, while Sacheverell, though his shoulder was pinned, was industriously trying to beat Cookie on the head with the silver chalice from which the cats had been drinking.

Mary had grabbed up some hatpins and darted forward. She hesitated whom to attack, then started for Cookie—not so much, Phil fancied, to help her husband but because Cookie's “ugly” had rankled.

Never before, not even in the trenches and foxholes, had Phil Gish seen real murder in a human face.

Now he saw it in five.

And then, very suddenly, it wasn't there at all.

The room grew very still. The black glass knife and the chalice clattered from Jack's and Sacheverell's hands. Mary's hatpins struck the floor with a faint, vibrant rattle. Juno's Buddha thudded on the Moslem prayer rug. Cookie's hands unlocked themselves and writhed back, as if ashamed even before they had a message from the brain.

Expressions unlocked too. Hate furrows softened and vanished. Lips that had writhed back from teeth moistly returned. Eyes filled with painful understanding.

Jack said, in a soft, amazed voice, “Juno, you really do love me. You don't just want to own me and shame me as a man."

Juno said, “You really do care what I think, don't you, Jack? Gosh!"

Cookie said, “I didn't realize it, Sacheverell: you partly mean what you say. It isn't all faking."

Mary said, “And you actually want Jack to be happy, Cookie. It isn't simply vanity and envy."

Sacheverell said, “My God, it's happening. And I mostly thought it was a stunt I was stage managing."

As for Phil, his feelings were in that golden sea they'd swum in this afternoon. He felt as if his heart were joined by sensitive strands to those of the five persons around him. It even seemed to him that there were delicate, gossamer wires connecting him to the figurines so that he understood Romadka, Barnes, Vanadin, maybe even himself.

Then, simultaneously with the others, he turned toward the velvet curtains. A few inches above the floor, Lucky's little green head had poked

through. It hung there like a large green jewel, flooding them in turn with its mellow rays. Then Lucky pushed all the way through the curtains.

Swiftly, from under tables and chairs, out from the fireplace, and from behind tiers of books, all the other cats appeared and gathered around Lucky in a circle.

“It has begun,” Sacheverell whispered happily. “The world is changing."

“Saint Francis of Assisi,” Mary murmured weakly, “incarnate in a cat."

Then Lucky walked slowly across the room. The other cats made way for him and then followed him, still keeping a respectful distance. He passed Mary and Cookie, passed Sacheverell, who looked just a shade disappointed, and sprang lightly into Phil's arms.

Phil had never held anything that weighed so little, or felt fur so electric. His chest seemed to him to be rather too small for his heart.

Sacheverell called softly yet ringingly, “You are the chosen one.” Phil looked at him and then, with an unreasoning and almost mystical gust of apprehension, at the black window behind him.

The glass in the window was vibrating, circular gray waves were spreading in it from a central spot.

At the same instant he felt his left hand, the one cradling Lucky, go dead. Lucky leaped convulsively in the air and fell perhaps six feet away from him and was still.

The glass in the window shattered all at once and tinkled to the floor, leaving only a few jagged shards around the frame.

Lucky's cat cortege broke up and its members raced into the hall and up the stairs.

Moe Brimstine stepped in through the window, with a suppleness one would never have expected of his huge body. He stood just inside it, gripping a stun-gun in his big mitt. His jowl seemed to Phil to be smeared with the darkness behind him, and his glasses elliptical patches of it.

“There's a couple of boys with orthos out there,” Moe said, stepping to one side of the window. “I know you don't want to get yourselves sliced up."

Apparently nobody did, though Phil at least hadn't any idea of what orthos might be.

“Listen carefully, everybody,” Moe said. “So long as you forget about all this, so long as you act and think like it never happened, beginning with

finding the cat this afternoon, then I'm going to forget all about you. That goes for you, Jack, though you're a dumber bunny than I ever thought and did yourself out of an easy ten—and for you, Juno, and Cookie, too. But if you don't forget, if I get just the littlest hint that you've remembered—well, we won't talk about that." He slowly scanned their faces. "Okay, then," he said, and shifting the gun to his left hand, stepped forward and scooped up Lucky.

"He ... he..." Sacheverell mumbled despairingly. Moe looked at him and Sacheverell was quiet.

"How long did this pussy sleep after you stun-gunned it?" Moe asked Jack.

Jack wet his lips. "Almost until now," he said. "Until maybe five minutes ago." Moe backed away toward the window.

Phil felt something moving from inside, something that tortured him into movement, for he certainly didn't want to stir a muscle.

He advanced toward Moe, a shaky step, then a couple, all the while feeling the most exquisite pains racking his torso as it was sliced by imagined orthos.

"Put that cat down," he croaked.

Moe looked at him with utter boredom.

"He's just a nut," he heard Jack assure Moe in an anxious whisper. "He won't cause trouble."

"I can see he is and won't," Moe said drily, shifting the gun to the hand from which Lucky dangled.

But Phil kept on toward the towering figure. He tried to stop, but the torturer inside him wouldn't let him—and now once again the same torturer pried open his teeth and lips.

"Put him down," he repeated. "You can't have him. Nobody can." He raised his fists, but the left one wouldn't close.

Moe looked at him disgustedly. The big fist came toward Phil's jaw, very slowly. Still, there somehow wasn't enough time to get out of the way.

VIII

PHIL struggled through the slap-slap of an invigorating gray surf, until he realized it was a wet towel wielded by Juno.

"How's the head?" she inquired with a grin that showed her lip scar.

The head seemed twice as thick and heavy as usual to Phil, but he didn't feel any special pain until his exploring hands came to the lump on his chin.

"You're okay," she told him, tossing the towel on the upset black and silver table. He doubted it.

"Do you think that by any chance Mr. Brimstine is a Beelzebite?"

Phil gingerly swiveled his head around. Sacheverell, whose green garment now seemed just a garish and not too clean bathrobe and whose dark complexion was merely sunburn again, appeared to be having a conference of some sort with Jack and Cookie. They were drinking. Mary was busy at her work table.

"A what?" Cookie asked suspiciously.

"You know, a Satanist, a devil-worshipper," Sacheverell explained briskly. "That would explain his stealing the Green One. A Satanist wouldn't want good to bloom in the world."

"Stop talking that silly guff," Cookie told him. "Moe Brimstine isn't interested in any kind of mystical crud or anything else, for that matter, except the do-re-mi. And neither is Mr. Billig. And Moe Brimstine wouldn't be working for anyone but himself or Mr. Billig—probably both. That's true, isn't it, Jack?"

The kingman didn't seem at all inclined to be talkative, but at this question he did nod his head with conviction.

Juno put a glass in Phil's hand. "Here, drink this," she told him. Phil looked at the brown stuff. "What is it?" he asked.

"Not soybean milk," she assured him. "Drink it up!"

The whiskey, which tasted as if it were laced with something bitter, burned his throat and brought tears to his eyes, but almost immediately his head began to feel clearer. He surveyed the room. Outside of Mary's work table, none of the mess had been cleaned up, though someone had taped the Moslem prayer rug over the broken window.

“And what's more,” Cookie was saying dogmatically, “your idea about that cat being mystical is crud too."

Sacheverell looked at him and Jack with exquisite blankness. “But didn't you feel it?” he asked. “Didn't you feel what it did to all of us?"

Jack shifted uneasily and didn't meet his gaze, but Cookie shrugged his shoulders and said nervously, “Oh, that! We were just all of us worked up, between your mumbo-jumbo and the fighting. We'd have believed anything."

“But didn't you feel your whole being change?” Sacheverell insisted. “Didn't you feel universal love and understanding burgeon?"

“Universal sky-pie!” Cookie said rudely. “I didn't feel a thing that meant anything. Did you, Jackie?"

The kingman didn't quite nod his head, but he certainly didn't shake it. And he didn't look at Sacheverell.

The latter surveyed them both with sad wonderment. “You've already forgotten,” he said. “You've made yourselves forget. But how,” he asked Cookie, “do you explain the behavior of the cats? They recognized the Green One. They tendered him worship."

“They just panted around after him,” Cookie asserted. “He's probably an oversexed hermaphrodite mutant. And another thing—if that cat's mystical and all dripping with powers, why did he let himself be knocked out? Why didn't he feed Moe Brimstine some universal sky-pie?"

“There was glass and distance between them,” Sacheverell reminded him. “Besides, if Mr. Brimstine is a Beelzebite—"

“What's more,” Cookie went on relentlessly, “why did he let himself be knocked out by Jack in the first place? Jackie, before you stun-gunned the little brute, you didn't feel any great burgeon of universal love, did you?"

Jack frowned. “I stunned him instinctively,” he said slowly, his downward gazing eyes studying the upset chalice, which chose this moment to roll two inches. “I glimpsed something out of the corner of my eye and shot.” He paused. “I actually thought it was a mouse."

“Instinctively or not, you stun-gunned it and we hustled it into the locker as soon as we saw it was green,” Cookie assured him decisively. “Which certainly proves the cat has no powers. Sash here just worked us up into thinking we had. Gave even me such an eerie feeling that if someone had

come in wearing an orange sheet and Sash had said it was Mohammed, I'd have believed him."

"But suppose the Green One was taken by surprise," Sacheverell argued. "All gods have limitations. Perhaps the Green One is not so much able to read thought as to join together telepathically the thoughts and feelings of mortals."

Cookie made a rude noise. Jack gave Cookie a quick look that was both angry and imploring, as if to say, "You've proved your point. Lay off."

Sacheverell shrugged and said, "Well, if I have to descend to your materialistic level, what is it that makes the Green One so important to Mr. Brimstine?"

"How should I know?" Cookie said huffily. "Maybe he's smuggling heroin in it or secret documents for Vanadin; maybe it belongs to the current mistress of the King of South Africa. Did Moe tell you anything, Jackie?"

"Just that he'd give $10,000 for a green cat and that he didn't want any dye jobs. That was a couple weeks ago. Some of the other boys asked for details, but he said there weren't any." He stood up. "But what's the use of talking about it? We can't do anything," he said harshly, suddenly glaring at Sacheverell, as if daring him, or imploring him, to answer.

"Well..." said Sacheverell.

Phil had finished his thinking. He got to his feet and squared his narrow shoulders. "We can rescue the green cat from Brimstine," he said. "Who's with me?"

Cookie whirled on him. "Nobody, not even yourself," he said, while Jack put his hand to his temple and groaned, "Now the Ikeless Joe."

Juno heaved herself out of her chair, and lumbered over with her glass and bottle. "Look, Phil," she said, "I gotta admit you're a spunky little mutt. But nobody, simply nobody, goes up against Moe Brimstine."

Phil considered that for a moment. "I did," he said proudly.

"Yeah, I know," she admitted, "but he didn't take it seriously."

Phil looked at Sacheverell. "How about you?" he asked. "You believe in Lucky."

Cookie glared warningly at Sacheverell. "If any one of us bothers Moe Brimstine about the green cat," Cookie said, "we'll all be inhaling molten plastic!"

“Well...” said Sacheverell, looking around for advice. His gaze settled on his wife. “Mary, what steps do you think we should take?"

Mary, chewing her tongue over a difficult job of wax shaving, twitched her shoulders. “I don't care what anyone else does,” she said, lifting off the microtome-thin flake. “I'm working on Moe Brimstine my own little way.” And she held up for their inspection a small wax head which already was beginning to look like the heavy jowled assistant boss of Fun Incorporated. “And when it's all finished,” she told them, “then needles and pins!"

Juno said, “Ugh!” Cookie looked almost impressed. While Sacheverell gnawed his lip thoughtfully and, with a wary eye on Jack and Cookie, said, “Yes, I suppose that is the best way after all."

“Okay,” Phil said and started for the door.

“Where do you think you're going?” Cookie demanded.

“To get him back,” Phil said.

At that there was a rush of footsteps and several voices competing in assuring him he would do no such thing, but it was Juno who grabbed his shoulders and swiveled him around.

“Phil,” she said, “for wunct I gotta admit that I agree with these jerks. You're not going to do anything about that—that fool cat. You just gotta get that through your nut wunct and for all."

Phil just smiled at her.

She shook her head disgustedly. “I shouldn't have give you that whiskey."

“It wasn't the whiskey, but what you put in it,” Cookie interjected crisply. “He's high."

Phil grinned at him serenely, as if to prove his point, then suddenly they all stepped back a bit, and for a moment they thought they had recognized his supreme self-confidence and bowed to the inevitable. Then he realized that they were looking beyond him and he felt cool air from the porch.

Dr. Romadka put down a black bag inside the doorway, said smilingly, “Hello, Sacheverell. Hello, Mary,” and nodded briefly to Jack, Juno, and Cookie, before casually turning his gaze to Phil.

“Well, Phil,” the analyst said waggishly, “that was quite a chase you led me, and I consider myself very lucky to have found you at all. It was a most interesting conversation we were having and I'm eager to continue it.” He spared the others a glance. “You'll excuse us talking professional matters for a moment, I hope. Now, Phil,” he went on persuasively, “I imagine that the

... er ... person who persuaded, or rather forced you to run away, tried to put all sorts of ideas into your head. But I'm sure I can show you in a few moments just how nonsensical they are. Incidentally, it was that same person who turned out the lights in the first place and put ail the doors on code. Quite a trickster, eh? And my daughter, too! So say good-by to your friends, Phil—I hope they won't be too angry with me for dragging you off."

By this time Dr. Romadka was far enough into the light so that the four streaks of dried blood on his cheek showed up plainly. Mary said mischievously, “Anton, I never did believe in that wild woman patient of yours who was always threatening mayhem, but now I guess I'm going to have to. Somebody clawed you real good."

Dr. Romadka's smile thinned a trifle. “Quite a few illusions turn out to be very real, Mary,” he said lightly, “although it's usually my job to prove the opposite. Eh, Phil? Such as that there really aren't any young women with hoofs and black fur who forget to turn off the window when they undress?"

“Or any green cats?” Phil asked quietly.

“Yes, anything like that,” Dr. Romadka agreed curtly.

“Why don't you admit, doctor,” Phil went on coolly, “that the green cat is another of those illusions that turn out to be very real? And that you're after it? You wouldn't startle these people a bit. They've all seen the green cat."

Dr. Romadka's eyes blazed with sudden suspicion, which didn't altogether abate when Cookie said in scandalized tones, “We did not,” and Jack insisted, “Doc, we don't know what the guy's talking about. But we do know he's a nut. That's why I sent him to you in the first place."

Phil watched with amusement as the psychoanalyst sharply scanned Juno, Sacheverell and Mary. Then Phil chuckled and said to them, cryptically, “It might be worse for you if I go off with the doctor instead of up against Brimstine."

New suspicions flared in Dr. Romadka's eyes, but Jack said swiftly, “Look, doc, are you going to take this guy in charge and put him away somewhere so that he won't be able to cause any trouble?"

“That's one thing you can be sure of,” Dr. Romadka snapped, shedding his smiles and subtlety. “Get this straight, Phil, you're coming with me whether you want to or not. In case you're thinking about running away again, I have several friends outside."

“Then that's swell,” Jack said, “I'm all for it. We'll be glad to get rid of him."

Juno, who had been frowning for a long while, now rocked her head like a puzzled bull. “Gee, Jack, I dunno,” she said. “I don't like it at all."

“Juno—” Jack began threateningly.

“I don't like the idea of tossing the little guy to the wolves,” she finished defiantly.

“To the wolves, Mrs. Jones?” Dr. Romadka asked dangerously. “That's done to save others. Please explain—"

But at that moment Sacheverell came hustling forward with great determination. There were no longer any traces of sympathy in the stern glance he fixed on Phil. “I think that Anton and Jack are quite right,” he announced, seizing Phil by shoulder and elbow and marching him toward the door. “I'm tired of your deceptions, Mr. Gish. You go right along with Anton and his friends, and no nonsense."

Phil heard a grunt of satisfaction from Dr. Romadka. He tried to twist away from Sacheverell, but the latter pressed even more closely to his side, so that his face was next to Phil's ear, and suddenly whispered, “Up the stairs, two flights."

The next moment, Phil felt himself pushed away, while Sacheverell reeled with a yelp into Dr. Romadka, who was stooping for his black bag, and at the same time managed to upset the antique floor lamp that dimly lit the hall.

Then Phil was racing up the creaking stairs in the sudden darkness, helping himself along by yanks at the rickety balustrade, while behind him he heard shouts and racing footsteps. Nearest were those of Sacheverell, who was crying manfully, “There he goes! After him, everyone!"

Phil raced along the backstretch of corridor and up the second flight, Sacheverell flapping at his heels like a green bat. At the top he grabbed Phil and shoved him through a door. For a moment their faces were close.

“Out the window and over the beam,” Sacheverell whispered. “Dare anything for *him.*"

The door was swiftly shut and he heard Sacheverell yell, “He's gone up in the attic. Follow me.” Phil was in darkness, facing a tall window dimly aglow from outside, while about his feet rats who had taken refuge in the room scurried frantically.

He walked over to the double-paned thing of wavy, ancient glass. He had read more than one comedy scene involving the impossibility of opening such primitive windows, but this one came up easily enough and all the way. He ducked through and crouched on the sill outside, steadying himself with one hand.

Around him was nineteenth-century, musty smelling wood and slate. Opposite him, about twenty feet away, was the top-level street, busy with speeding electrics. Joining the two was a metal beam about eight inches wide, faintly outlined in the glow from the car's headlights. The beam was grimy with dirt. It based itself in the brick chimney that rose just beside the window. In fact, one of Phil's feet was on it. Below were two stories of mostly darkness.

What happened next may very well have been made possible by the fear-abolishing, nerve-steadying drug Juno had put in his whiskey, though Phil laid it to the influence of Lucky and to Sacheverell's grotesque yet strangely thrilling injunction. Certainly Phil was no athlete and had, if anything, a touch of acrophobia.

At any rate, he slowly got to his feet, let go the window, poised himself for a moment, and then ran lightly across the beam. He rolled clumsily over the railing at the other end and sprawled on the sidewalk.

At the same instant a needle of glaring blue lanced up through the dark behind him. It cut through the beam at an angle, spat redly for a moment against the black “roof” a few feet above the Akeleys’ house, and winked out.

The beam held for a moment, then slowly slid past itself at the cut. The chimney fell lazily. There were yells and one scream came from below. The roof of the Akeley place slid forward a foot—and stopped. Dust mushroomed up.

Then Phil was racing down the street to a cab parked a quarter of a block away. He was thinking that, whatever those orthos of Moe Brimstine's boys were, apparently Dr. Romadka's friends had them too. He couldn't help sparing a thought for the plight of the group in the reeling attic. He could almost hear Juno's titanic curses.

Then he was piling into the cab.

“The Tan Jet,” he told the driver. “It's a kind of night club."

“Yeah, I know,” the latter said in a voice heavy with knowledge, fixing on Phil the sad, resigned gaze one reserves for those who insist, against all good advice, on running to their dooms.

IX

SOMEONE singing, “Turn of the Century Blues” in a sultry, melancholy voice was all that Phil could hear as he walked down the dark ramp and into the hardly brighter Tan Jet. No live or robot doorman was on guard, at least no obvious one, and no hostess came hurrying up. Apparently customers were supposed to know their way around.

There were a lot of them. They sat in small parties with a truculent quietness that sneered at and challenged the frantic hustle of the times and the belief that the hustle was leading anywhere. There were no juke box theatres in the corners, no TV screens visible, and the booths didn't seem to be equipped with handies. Four live musicians softly blew and strummed old jazz instruments, while a single amber spotlight shone on the coffee colored, deceivingly languid songstress, whose sequined dress went all the way to her wrists and chin.

I'm sad-crazy, sweetheart, tonight,
My heart is heavy in the sodium light...

A young man and woman coming from opposite shadowy walls sighted each other. “Lambie Pie!” he cried. She stood stock still as he walked up to her and gave her a slap that rocked her red-ringletted head. Then, “Loverman!” she cried and slapped him back. Phil could see his eyes roll ecstatically as the red flamed in his smacked cheek. They linked arms ritualistically and made off.

And it don't help, sweetheart, to know
That the whole world went crazy—
Moon-mazy and space-hazy—
About a hundred years ago,
So—

At that moment Phil spotted the dark sheen of Mitzie Romadka's hair and cloak at the far end of the room. He started toward her, suddenly feeling a trifle uneasy.

Put away my sky-high platform shoes
And don't bring me any happy news, For—
I've got those turn of the century—
Turn of the millennium—

Blues!

As the listeners softly hissed their applause, Phil stopped a few feet away from Mitzie's table. She was with three young men, but they sat away from her pointedly, as if she were ostracized.

The three young men, without lifting a finger, showed more of the mystic toughness that seemed to be the specialty of the joint than any other people in it. They had the quiet dignity of murderers. When Mitzie turned to see what they were looking at, she sprang up with the delighted cry of “Phil!” though there was alarm in her eyes. She wasn't wearing her evening mask. She walked over to him and slapped him stingingly with her left hand.

He whipped up his hand to slap her back, hesitated, and barely managed a sketchy pat. She glared at him but turned back with a bright smile, saying gayly, “Fellows, Phil. Phil, meet Carstairs, Llewellyn, and Buck."

Carstairs had a head that bulged at the top like a pear. He wore thin bangs, the effect of which was not effeminate. He remarked lazily to Mitzie, “So this is the clown you blabbed tonight's plans to."

Llewellyn looked very British and was very black. He said, “You also seem to have told him we'd come here later. Puzzles me why he didn't bring the police."

Buck was hawk faced and had a Kentucky accent that sounded as if it had been learned from tapes. “P'lice never tried to pick up anybody in the Tan Jit, yit,” he observed. “Not here, Otie!” This last remark was addressed to a gaunt, mangy dog which thrust its head from under his legs and snapped at Phil.

Phil leaned on the table, his hand next to a tall, slim pitcher. He said to Mitzie, “I'm surprised to find you at a tame place like this. I expected drugs, knife fights and naked women."

Mitzie whirled his way. “As for drugs, what do you think we're drinking?” she said furiously. “As for knife fights, wait. And as for naked women, you devotee of male-female wrestling, well, if Carstairs, Llewellyn, or Buck should happen to see a girl who took their fancy, I'd just walk up to her and rip off her clothes!

She was looking past Phil when she finished. He swiveled his head and saw Miss Phoebe Filmer with a rather scared looking young man. But Phoebe, in a half off the bosom chartreuse evening gown, looked even more frightened, her face almost as green as her green-blonde hair. Perhaps she

had heard Mitzie's last remark. Then she recognized Phil, and astonishment was added to her fright. Phil smiled at her with a somewhat forced reassuringness. At that moment Phoebe's escort called her attention to an empty booth back toward the door, and the two of them hurried toward its haven with the eagerness of slummers who have overreached themselves.

Phil felt remarkably bucked up. He snared an empty chair from the next table and found himself an empty glass and filled it from the tall, slim pitcher. Llewellyn, who, like the others had a half-inch in the bottom of his glass, caught Buck's attention and rolled his eyes significantly toward the ceiling. The white made eerie half-moons under the irises.

"Just rip 'em off," Mitzie repeated with conviction.

Carstairs said, with a quietly scathing coldness, "Mitz, quit playing the solicitous little mother to Llewellyn, Buck and me." He carefully smoothed his bangs, as an ancient judge might have adjusted his wig before pronouncing sentence. "It's quite clear that you spilled our plans to this clown, and that he told the police so that they were waiting for us when we knocked over the first sales-robot."

"Quite," Llewellyn said, while Buck nodded.

"And if I hadn't insisted on putting a new charge in the rocket assist," Carstairs continued, "we'd have been nabbed."

"It was just a coincidence," Mitzie asserted sharply.

"First time we ever had a coincidence," Carstairs observed. "Personally, I don't believe there are such things."

Phil took a deep drink. It seemed mild, sweet stuff, compared to the adulterated whiskey Juno had fed him. That is, it seemed so for the first two or three seconds. Then he felt the top of his head balloon outward, pear-wise, like Carstairs'. The dark songstress was singing some song the refrain of which was,

Darling, I'm queer for you.

I'm really strange, quite out of any ordinary range...

Carstairs continued quietly, "Mitz, we let you into the gang, we initiated you, although we knew you were a psychoanalyst's daughter and doubtful material—"

Mitzie glared at him. "Initiated me?" she said. "I'll say you did!"

"Be that as it may," Carstairs asserted slowly, "you betrayed the gang tonight. At the best you acted irresponsibly." His words came slower still.

“Your irresponsibility lost us a wad of dough.” He paused for a long cruel moment. “You're out, Mitz."

“Out,” Carstairs repeated.

“Definitely,” Llewellyn agreed. “Yeah,” Buck said, rubbing Otie's lean snoot.

Phil put his elbows on the table. “Gentlemen,” he said quietly, “you say you are out a wad of dough? I am in a position to remedy that."

Carstairs looked at him with mild irritation and raised his open hand. Phil smiled and advanced his cheek. “I am seeking a jewel beyond price,” he continued. “In order to obtain it, I intend tonight to burgle the premises of Fun Incorporated. I am willing to let you help me."

At the mention of Fun Incorporated, Buck turned his head at least half an inch, while Carstairs almost blinked.

“You have rather big ideas, don't you?” Llewellyn remarked quietly.

“Yeah,” Buck agreed with a yawn, “he maybe could have picked an easier place."

Carstairs asked Mitzie softly, “You did say he was one of your father's nuts, didn't you?"

Mitzie started to reply, but Phil interposed blandly, “I know a private way into Fun Incorporated, right through Billig's office. It'll be simple. You needn't worry about the wasps."

Buck drawled, “What is this jewel beyond price, anyhow?"

“Something I wouldn't expect you to appreciate,” Phil replied. “However,” he continued, taking a more cautious slug of the mind swelling drink, “there should be enough in the way of ordinary valuables lying about to compensate you for your effort. I understand that Fun Incorporated is rather wealthy. For one thing, all sales-robots work from there,” he finished grandly. “Why not hit them where they live?"

Otie stretched leanly from under Buck's chair and snapped at Phil's hand. Phil, stiffened by the drink, didn't move it. The jaws clashed hardly an inch away. “Why do you call him Otie?” Phil asked.

“'Cause he's a coyote,’ Buck explained, almost with condescension. “S'posed to have been bred back for ancestral traits to the Oligocene type."

Phil found himself wondering whether cats could be bred back to their Egyptian ancestors and whether those ancestors might have been green.

In the pause, Mitzie's eyes grew bright. She looked at her companions. “Why don't we take him up on it?” she said lightly but not casually. “I mean, about Fun Incorporated. It sounds exciting.

“Why don't we?” Mitzie repeated after a moment.

Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck sat there as coolly and as contemptuous of any challenge as when Phil had first seen them. Yet there was a difference.

“Of course, it's risky,” Phil cut in. “Moe Brimstine's boys have orthos."

“What do you know about orthos?” Carstairs demanded hungrily.

Phil shrugged. “They're blue and they sizzle,” he said. “I got shot at with one earlier tonight."

“Why don't we, I'm asking?” Mitzie pressed.

“I asked Juno and Jack Jones to help me,” Phil put in. “You know, the wrestlers. But they decided not to."

Still no one answered Mitzie's question. “Well, I guess that's it,” she said with a triumphant smile, turning away from the table. “Come on, Phil."

They had taken three steps when Carstairs began to chuckle quietly. Phil might have kept going, but Mitzie turned back with a carefully repressed eagerness that Phil resented.

“Don't kill yourselves running,” Carstairs said. “Llewellyn and Buck and I are signing up for this little expedition, providing the clown can give the right answers to a few questions when we get outside.” He smiled as he got up. “Just one thing, Mitz. This time there better be no cops."

Mitzie laughed. Phil accepted the situation with a “Glad to have your help, boys,” and started to take Mitzie's arm, but she linked hers with those of Carstairs and Llewellyn, not sparing Phil another look.

The sequined singer had shifted to a snappier rhythm.

Slap me silly, honey,

Beat me till I break.

Love is very funny,

Laugh until I ache...

To solace his injured feelings, Phil veered over to Phoebe Filmer's booth, where the green-blonde was being rather pointedly annoyed by two bearded young men while her escort looked on agitatedly.

Phil tapped the nearest ruffian on the shoulder. “Lay off, boys,” he commanded, with a meaningful nod toward his own party. Buck at least

looked his way and Otie growled. The bearded ruffians slunk off. Phil made Phoebe a tiny bow.

"Thank you," she said weakly and astoundedly.

He gestured that it was a mere nothing and walked off.

"Say," she asked, hurrying after him and dragging her escort with her, "did you ever find that green cat of yours?"

He smiled at her. "No," he said, "but I'm going to."

X

“AND how did you plan to get inside when the place is closed for the night?” Carstairs prodded sardonically.

For answer Phil cocked his eyebrows defiantly and gave the restaurant door a smart shove. It swung silently inward. He led them in haughtily, vaguely aware that Llewellyn was examining the lock.

The long room was very dark. It smelled stalely of people and liquor and seared meat; Phil even thought he could distinguish Juno's burned rabbit chops. Otie snuffed eagerly and tugged Buck forward by his leash. Phil steered their course confidently between the counter and the booths. He was feeling particularly pleased with himself because Mitzie had found opportunity to ask him for his address on the way over.

“All right, all right,” he heard Carstairs whisper behind him to Llewellyn, “so the lock was burned. Somebody's ahead of us. We'll be watching out."

Phil pushed open the door to the stairs, and hesitated. Inside it was now completely black.

Something hissed softly beside him and a luminescent cone puffed out. A couple of seconds later, the half dozen treads of the stairway glowed milkily.

Buck chuckled inches from Phil's ear. “Lum'niscint mist,” he explained with professional casualness. “You get going. I'll spray."

Phil started up, the milky surface light keeping two or three treads ahead of him in blobby advances. The mist got on Otie, so that he glowed like the Hound of the Baskervilles. Some of it even got on Phil's trouser bottoms and sockasins.

“We're certainly marked if we have to run away and hide,” Phil commented dubiously as he reached the corridor he and Juno had come through and then took the unknown way upward.

“Uh-uh,” Buck chuckled wisely, “'cause I'm spraying a neutralizer behind us.” He directed at Phil's feet a dark, faintly hissing canister and Phil's feet blacked out, along with a blob of surrounding treads. Looking back, Phil saw that the glow on the stairs vanished abruptly. He could not see Mitzie. Carstairs, and Llewellyn.

He asked Buck, “How do you manage two canisters and Otie all at the same time?"

“Hell, I could aim a squirrel rifle and run a still in addition,” Buck assured him.

Phil became aware of a dim radiance above him, beyond the range of Buck's mist. Buck hurriedly neutralized all the luminescence, including that on Otie and Phil. Phil cautiously went up the last ten treads, the upper radiance increasing all the while, and found himself in a shadowy, curving corridor. His steps got shorter and shorter, then stopped.

A couple yards ahead lay three swollen furry shapes, each with a half dozen slim black things stuck into them, like feathered darts.

He recognized at least two of the dead cats. Although grotesquely puffed up, their markings told him they were a Siamese and a short hair he had seen at the Akeleys'.

“Watch it!” he heard Carstairs whisper, but at the same instant Otie jerked away from Buck and moved swiftly forward, his leash trailing, to snuff at the nearest swollen shape. The tail of the dart next to Otie's nose began to revolve with a faint, feathery rustle. Otie became tensely still, disregarding his master's anxious, “Back Otie!” The rustle became a whirr. Otie suddenly snapped sidewise at the dart, but at the same instant the dart withdrew quickly from the dead cat. Otie's teeth clashed emptily. The dart hovered a few feet in the air, just like a huge black wasp. ‘Don't anybody go closer.” Carstairs ordered hoarsely. Buck grabbed for the end of the leash, but it was flirted away from his hand when Otie abruptly changed position, watching the dart with deadly intentness.

The whirr became a loud sinister buzz. There were two quick *zings* and the hovering dart trembled like a blown candle flame. Half turning, Phil saw that Carstairs was shooting at it with some sort of airgun. The dart began to waltz in little loops. Otie leaped straight up, and snapped at it as a dog might at a bee, but the dart curtsied away.

Buck's “Back, Otie,” was desperate. Otie stayed on his feet and batted at the dart with his paws. There were more futile *zings* from Carstairs’ airgun. The dart looped back and hovered in front of Otie's muzzle. As he opened his jaws for a snap, it shot down his throat.

Otie, his eyes and jaws open wide, beat the air with his paws. Then he dropped to all fours and hurled himself off at top speed. He slammed

against a wall, got up with difficulty, trembled over to Buck, and fell down and didn't move. It seemed to Phil that the gaunt creature was taking a deep breath, and then Phil suddenly felt sick, for the coyote was beginning to swell.

"Don't touch him!" Carstairs shouted, but Buck was keeping his distance. Carstairs came up beside Buck and leaned prudently forward, his bangs swinging out from his forehead. "Always did want to see one of those things in action," he said softly.

"They're what they call singular missiles, aren't they?" Llewellyn asked fascinatedly, coming up. "Anti-individual, I mean."

Carstairs nodded. "Used them in the last cold war, though hardly any rumors got out. They were for assassinations. The FBL and the Russkies could tell tales. They're supposed to be driven by a tiny, ion-emitting radioactive fan. I wish I had a counter so I could know. And of course, they home on the radiant heat of flesh and then inject a poison."

Buck muttered, "Otie." The coyote's puffed eyes turned toward him, then glazed over. Buck jerked up and made a derisive noise. "Always was a dumb pooch," he said harshly. Mitzie, drawn even with Llewellyn, looked on coldly.

Phil started ahead, drugs battling nausea inside him, so that the dim corridor seemed both vivid and unreal.

"Where are you going?" Carstairs demanded.

Phil shrugged. "To find what I came for," he said hazily.

"Well, keep away from the cats," Carstairs called after him softly, but Phil was already hugging the wall.

"How we know those sing'lar missles won't heat up and go for us like they went for Otie?" he heard Buck demand fretfully.

"The others got through, didn't they?" Carstairs said irritably.

"What others?" Phil heard Buck ask.

"The ones who burnt the lock on the door, the ones who threw the cats ahead of them to draw the missiles," Carstairs told him impatiently. "Incidentally, if any of the missiles start spinning their tails, you might try throwing your coat over them."

Beyond the dead cats, Phil came to a silvery mesh barricade with several jagged cuts in it, three of them making a crude doorway. The mesh looked fine and strong enough to have kept the wasps on this side. He stepped over

the fallen section of mesh. The cut ends of silvery wire were rounded and fused, as if by great heat.

Just beyond the mesh lay a chunky man in a gray, company-guard uniform. He had a gun in his hand. He was intact except that the top of his head had rolled about a foot away. It had been sliced off tidily just above the nose by something hot. Phil remembered how neatly the blue needle had sliced the steel beam. He hurried past toward an open arch just ahead, and jerked back from a large gray snake coiled there. Then he saw that the snake was a robot doorman like Old Rubberarm, and looking higher he saw that it had been sliced off close to the wall.

Mitzie and the rest came through the mesh. Carstairs kneeled eagerly by the dead man and examined the gun he was clasping, but a moment later got up with a shrug.

“Not an ortho, eh?” Buck inquired. “Usin’ those sing'lar missiles, you'd think they'd be up to date in other things."

“No, just an ordinary gas gun,” Carstairs told him. “But we can be pretty sure his head wasn't taken off by a red hot buzz saw. The others must have orthos.” He turned on Phil and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket. “Look here, clown,” he said quietly, “who are those others? You must have known someone was going to break in here tonight. You were counting on that door being open."

“We are a bit like jackals, aren't we?” Phil remarked dreamily.

Carstairs twisted his jacket. “Who were they?"

Phil didn't react, but he did jerk around suddenly when he heard Moe Brimstine say metallically, “Whatcha want, Mack?"

Llewellyn had pulled out the stub of gray robot arm sticking from the wall.

“Quit that,” Carstairs ordered curtly, letting go of Phil.

“Take it easy, Carstie old boy,” Llewellyn said with a smiling flash of white teeth. “Here's a bit of an odd thing. See where whatever sliced this robot arm cut into the wall beyond? Well, follow back from the cut in a straight line through the slice in the robot arm."

Like the others, Phil followed Llewellyn's directions and saw that the straight line ended in a deep cut in the floor a half dozen feet behind them.

“I don't git it,” Buck said. “You mean somebody shot some kind of beam from the next floor under us?"

Llewellyn said, “Hardly. The evidence points to a gun that shoots in opposite directions at the same time. I fancy that if we'd have looked behind us at the head of the stairs, we'd have seen some cuts mirror-imaging those in the mesh."

He thinned his eyes at Carstairs. “I'm beginning to think orthos are rather strange weapons, Carstie old boy.” He glanced at Phil. “You said they're blue and sizzle, Mr. Gish. Do they also backfire?"

“Say, look at this here communicator,” Buck interrupted. He had been poking around the side of the corridor behind the guard. “One button's got a new-looking gadget rigged up to it that's pushed it twice now while I've been watching."

“Don't touch it,” Carstairs said. “It's probably a button Headless here is supposed to thumb every so often to show he's on guard. Whoever broke in ahead of us knows their business. Once more, clown, who were they?"

“Yeah, talk,” Buck said, coming up beside Carstairs. “I figure you're responsible for my Otie gettin’ killed."

“Indeed, do,” Llewellyn said, at the same moment letting go of the stub arm which contracted toward the wall until it was like a wrinkled scar, while at the same time, as though internal injuries were now showing up in the thing, a broken clockworks version of Moe Brimstine's voice wheezed, “That's right, Mack. Go away and stay away."

In the moment while that eerie and ominous admonition held everyone else stockstill, Phil walked with drugged aplomb past Llewellyn and through the arch.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I imagine you would like to inspect the treasure house."

He faced a room that was not extremely high ceilinged, but so wide and long that the only clearly visible wall was the one against which they were standing. The room was not brightly lit, yet it seemed so because of the brightness of the two sorts of ranked objects on which the light fell. To the left were row on endless row of sales-robots, shiny high turtle shapes with a smaller dome set on the main one, the same efficient metal hucksters that daily and eveningly roamed the streets, guiding themselves and spotting customers by hypersonic radar and visual scanner. Only now their fascinating windows for displaying samples were closed, their money collecting and commodity bestowing arms were neatly folded, the restless

wheels under their metal skirts were still, and their dulcet voices rich with a restrained sex appeal suitable to robots (male voices for females, female for males, sprightly and wise-cracking for children) were likewise silent.

To the right, marshaled with equal precision, were a host of dress-display robots, arrayed in everything from high collared sable evening cloaks to bathing jewelry. Their hair gleamed with a hundred tints, their suede-rubber skins glowed with a creamy seductiveness, they held themselves with the poise of princesses, but like the sales-robots they were still. No slinky parading, no cute individualized gestures, no mysterious or haughty smiles, no soft lips opening to recite the qualities and prices of the garments they were modeling. They all stared straight ahead like Egyptian mummies not yet wrapped and indeed one, appropriately crowned and clad in a filmy sheath, was a precise copy of Nefertiti.

It occurred to Phil that the ranked sales-robots and dress-display robots really were a military display, that he was looking at the armed might—the money army and the glamor army—of Fun Incorporated.

Llewellyn was the first to break the silence. He darted to the nearest sales-robot, made some practiced manipulations, and then there was a clinking and he was waving a green and silver handful and his teeth and the whites of his eyes shone gleefully in his black face.

“They're still carrying the day's cash!” he called softly.

Buck looked from the money army to the glamor army with greedy indecision. When Carstairs snorted contemptuously, he trotted over to help Llewellyn, who was methodically working his way down the first row of sales-robots.

Despite his show of greater self control, it was obvious that Carstairs’ hands were itching too. He looked at Phil uncertainly. Then, “Wake up, Mitz,” he commanded sharply. She obediently turned toward him an oddly incurious face. “Mitz,” he went on, “I want you to guard the clown. If he tries to get away or goes for any buttons, use your shiv on him.” She nodded.

“Hey,” Buck called in an excited stage whisper, “I think we're coming to some that are gambling robots."

But Carstairs didn't go at once, although he was noiselessly snapping his fingers in an excess of impatience. He studied Mitzie fiercely. “You get it, Mitz? I don't want any slip-ups. You made one already today. Not that I

believe for a minute you're soft on the clown, but you've acted a bit silly around him. There mustn't be any more of that. Understand?"

This time her nod, though mute as the first, seemed to satisfy him and he rushed off to join Llewellyn and Buck.

At the same instant Phil quietly turned around and walked through an archway just beside the one through which they had entered the big room. He hadn't taken ten steps down the curving corridor before Mitzie had whirled past him and poised herself squarely in his path.

“Get back,” she whispered. The hand directing the ten-inch knife at Phil's chest didn't waver enough to make the frosty highlights on it flicker.

Phil smiled at her. “Mitzie,” he said gently, “your friends have found what they came for, but I haven't. You're going to let me go past."

She spat her denial and advanced the knife so that it touched his shirt.

Phil didn't budge. “You're going to let me go past,” he repeated softly, “because you're not sure any more that being cruel and smart, and if need be deadly, is the right way to face the world. You're not sure any more that the approval of your gang is the only thing that matters. Incidentally, it's a pretty grudging approval, Mitzie, something you've had to sit up and do tricks for like that other dumb pooch, and your comradeship with them isn't at all the romantic, until death, one for all and all for one thing you pretend it is. But I haven't the time to tell you any more about that now, because I've got my business and I've got to get on with it."

“Get back,” she snarled. But Phil, although the knife now pricked his chest, knew it was no longer a command but a plea.

“I'm going past now, Mitzie,” Phil murmured and walked ahead into the knife. For about two feet it drew back at exactly the same speed with which he walked into it, then it was whipped suddenly to one side, and as he passed Mitzie he caught the choked off beginning of a sob.

Neither of them made another sound. He looked back once and saw her profile in the light from the big room, and the slack line of her shoulder and the arm holding the knife. Often faces look unexpectedly weak in profile, but Phil felt he'd never seen one that also looked so tragically lost.

Its image haunted him as the curving corridor grew darker and then lighter again and then made a very sharp turn and unexpectedly emerged into a long, richly furnished room. He blundered a step forward before he saw there were three people at the far end and that one of them was Moe

Brimstine. They weren't looking his way and he could have ducked back out of sight easily enough, but he hurried it too much and brushed against a slim pillar topped by a small aquarium in which tiny pink, green and violet octopuses clung and swam. The pillar teetered dangerously. Stumbling as he grabbed to steady it, he fell out into the room with it and thudded into the foam flooring, as the water and the candy colored octopuses gushed all over.

XI

AFTER a couple of seconds Phil decided regretfully that keeping himself scrunched against the yielding floor with both eyes tightly closed was not going to help. He opened them cautiously, blinked at the flooring, and tried to nerve himself to look up. Meanwhile:

“Brimstine, what's keeping that FBL man?"

“Now don't worry, Mr. Billig. He'll be here any minute.” “I'm beginning to doubt it. What if they're lying about sending a man, and actually they're planning to raid us, counting on picking up the green cat when they do?"

“The government wouldn't dare do that, Mr. Billig. They need the green cat, or they think they do."

“Then why isn't that FBL man here?"

“I tell you not to worry, Mr. Billig. Relax. Let Dora stroke your forehead."

“Pfui!"

Considerably puzzled, Phil lifted his chin off the flooring and cautiously swiveled his head. The Mr. Billig he'd heard mentioned with so much awe turned out to be a very gaunt dark man who looked at first glance thirty, at second seventy, and at third a mystery to which youth-prolonging hormones might provide a clue. He was dressed in severely cut black sports togs. Moe Brimstine bulked a lot bigger, but only physically—his blunt manner had altered to that of a servant with clownish privileges. Even his black glasses now looked a trifle comic.

The other member of the trio was a breathtakingly beautiful violet blonde whose dress consisted of an endless spiral of fine silver wire over a white satin sheath. She was sitting on a table, watching the others with a cold smile. Mr. Billig was pacing steadily as if engaged in some kind of road-work, while Moe Brimstine was hovering behind him like an anxious trainer.

But to Phil the one overwhelming fact was that they weren't paying any attention to him at all. Apparently his crashing with the aquarium into the room hadn't been of enough importance to rate a glance—or if there had been a glance, it had been a mighty short one. Besides being utterly mystified and quite frightened, Phil felt a bit piqued.

“I don't think you should take that attitude toward Dora, Mr. Billig,” Moe Brimstine was saying. “She's a very clever girl; just how clever even you might enjoy finding out. Isn't that right, Dora?"

“I am infinitely skilled in giving pleasure to men, women and children,” Dora said with a yawn. “Among other things I have memorized all the important pornographic books written since the dawn of history."

“Pfui and trash! Brimstine, you still don't seem to realize just how serious this is. I guess I should tell you that, according to my latest information, the government is all set to indict not only three of our governors and a half hundred of our mayors, but also four of our national senator and a dozen of our representatives.”

This news did seem to take Moe Brimstine aback. “But that's the whole lot,” he said softly.

“Not quite, but almost,” Billig snapped.

“It would mean the absolute finish of Fun Incorporated."

“And what have I been saying to you?” Billig demanded.

Phil sat up a bit morosely and settled his chin on the back of his right hand to watch them. This maneuver attracted no attention whatsoever. He gave up trying to figure it out.

Moe Brimstine had recovered his spirits with a happy shrug. “Anyhow, you've got the green cat, so you're safe."

“Have I got it?” Billig demanded, stopping his pacing. “How well have you got that cat locked up, Brimstine?"

“Look, Mr. Billig, I got it in a copper cage where nobody can get at it and it can't get at nobody, even electronically. Besides, it's still stunned. You can't ask for more than that, can you?"

“Maybe not,” Billig allowed grudgingly. “But then I come back to my other point: How can we be sure the government needs the cat so badly they'll be willing to quash all those indictments in exchange for it?"

“Now don't worry about that, Mr. Billig. That's one thing we can be sure of. We've known for at least a month that finding that cat has been the absolute top priority, top secret job of the FBL, the FBI and the special secret service."

“But why should it be?” Billig was pacing again. “Just a funny colored animal. It doesn't make sense."

“Look, Mr. Billig, we've been all through this before. They're absolutely convinced that cat is terribly dangerous. They think it can control minds and change personalities, and they seem to think they have cases to prove it, including four top officials who've managed to skip the country, apparently headed for Russia. They've taken all sorts of secret steps, not only to find the cat, but to guard the president and all important officials from any possible contact with it. As far as our information goes, the first government theory was that the cat came from Russia, that the Lysenko view of genetics was true and that the Russkies were able to breed intelligent animals with extrasensory powers, for use as spies and saboteurs and possibly to replace a large part of the world's population. But now the government seems to believe that the cat is a mutant or monster of some sort and that it's in a position to conquer America—the whole world even—by controlling feelings and thoughts."

Phil sat up indignantly. He wanted to say, “Why, Lucky isn't like that at all.” In his interest in the conversation, he had almost forgotten his incredible situation.

“I know, I know,” Billig was saying, “but what do you think about it, Brimstine?"

Brimstine shrugged. “I think they're nuts,” he said happily. “The cat didn't seem anything peculiar to me, though I'm taking no chances. I think it's all a grade-A delusion, a top secret panic."

“You think they're nuts and you expect me not to worry,” Billig groaned. “Where's that FBL man?"

“On his way.” Brimstine assured him. “Everything's going to turn out all right."

“That's what you told me when the president first started to take action against Fun.” Billig flared. “You said it was just a bluff, a sop to the midwestern vote. You told me Barnes was a drunken farmer who could be got at twenty ways. You told me it would all blow over, like the other six times. Well, it didn't. Something happened that changed things."

“I know,” Brimstine admitted, seeming for once at a loss for easy words.

“Don't you know yet what happened?” Billig pressed.

Brimstine shrugged. “I think Barnes is nuts."

“That's your explanation for everything!” Billig roared softly. “If something happens this time, do you suppose I'll be happy because you tell

me the coppers arresting me are nuts? Where *is* the FBL man?"

"You really should try and relax, I tell you, Mr. Billig," Moe Brimstine suggested, recovering himself. "Distract yourself somehow. Like with Dora here." And ignoring Billig's third, "Pfui," Brimstine looked at her critically. "Fix your mouth, dear," he said.

With a graceful obedience that nevertheless managed to be contemptuous the violet blonde beauty slid from the table and came straight toward Phil, who decided that now at last they'd have to stop pretending he wasn't there.

"Get that slinky walk, Mr. Billig," Moe Brimstine was urging. "What a gorgeous babe, eh?"

She tossed her head, stopped six feet short of Phil, took out a lipstick, looked straight ahead of her, and very carefully made up her lips. At the same time something cold and sucking closed on the fingers of Phil's left hand. He instinctively flipped it, and a tiny pink octopus sailed through the air toward the girl and flattened itself against something in the air about two feet short of her.

Phil watched it clinging there and felt his mind swell to bursting, as if he'd had another shot of Tan Jet lemonade. Then he got up, walked cautiously forward, and fell.

There was an invisible flat surface, extending as far as he could reach, between himself and the other half of the room. He realized he was on the viewing side of a one-way mirror bisecting the room. Dora, standing so close he could otherwise have touched her, turned, and as she did so, her skirt brushed the other side of the surface. He saw it was at least two inches from the side to which the octopus still clung. A mirror would hardly be that thick. It must consist of two panes probably with the space between them evacuated. For as he realized with a new surprise, he must not be hearing their voices directly, but a miked and transmitted version of them, which in turn must be binaural, so that they would be heard in depth and the proper direction.

Confirming this, he noted that the voices did not localize quite as perfectly as they had seemed to before he had caught on to the illusion. Also, the depth effect was a bit too rich, as if the mikes were more than ears-distance apart.

He also saw that all sources of illumination were beyond the panel.

But now that he knew they were not ignoring him, but simply unaware of his presence, he felt very much the burglar and very uneasy. He looked nervously back along the corridor he'd traveled and ahead along its darker and straighter continuation that, also this side of the panel, led out of the room. He asked himself why Billig should have the setup arranged and the sound turned on so that he and Brimstine and Dora could be spied on. It didn't make sense. Although he was protected, Phil felt a shiver legging it up his spine.

He might have left the spy chamber but at that moment Moe Brimstine put down a phone and said excitedly, “He's coming!” whereupon Billig at once stopped pacing and became as cool and unworried as dark tranquil water. He pointedly did not look at the archway beyond him, though Brimstine did.

A man came through the archway and stopped. He held his spine and the expression of his face very straight.

His hair was touched with gray and his face showed years of worry—but not Billig's kind.

Billig looked at him with a questioning smile that barely stopped short of a smirk. He waited a moment and said softly, “Under the circumstances, I suppose you do not care to use your name, but—"

“It's Dave Greeley,” the other said bluntly.

“—but I do suppose that you come from the Federal Bureau of Loyalty and that you are fully empowered to deal for the services and the president?"

The other nodded once.

“Mr. Greeley, Mr. Brimstine,” Billig said with a gracious wave of his arm that reminded Phil of the swaying of a snake. “Mr. Greeley, Dora ... er, Dora Pannes."

The government man barely acknowledged the introductions.

“Mr. Billig,” he said, “you tell us you have the green cat. If you have, we'll buy it."

“And what will you pay?” Billig murmured.

“The Moreland-McCartney letters, proving the graft those senators received from Fun Incorporated, plus all related recording and microwave tapes. Similar material in sixty-odd other cases, which I hardly need enumerate to you in detail."

“Not enough,” Billig said softly.

Greeley hesitated. “Of course, I could appeal to you,” he said in a different voice; “simply as Americans, as citizens of this hemisphere facing a deadly danger—"

“Please, Mr. Greeley,” Billig said with a chuckle.

Greeley shut his lips tight. When he opened them, his earlier voice spoke.

“Letters of confidence on all the indicted officials, dated today and signed and thumbprinted by the president and all the service heads, with confirming vocal recordings and pictures of the recordings being made. Naturally our experts will have to examine the cat before the exchange is made. They can be here in twenty minutes."

“That is better,” Billig murmured, “quite a bit better. But not enough."

“What else do you want?” Greeley demanded angrily, but it seemed to Phil that he knew.

“The witnesses, delivered into our hands,” Billig said. “O'Malley, Fattori, Madelin Luszcak, and the thirty-odd —no, I'll be precise—thirty-four others."

“That's out,” Greeley said sharply. “I can't offer to pay you in human lives."

“Who mentioned anything like that?” Billig asked mildly. “I didn't, did I, Moe? It's just that we'd feel safer with the witnesses in our protective custody rather than yours."

“You know what you'd do to them,” Greeley said.

Billig shrugged. “You wouldn't have to think about it. In any case, there are ways to forget.” And he glanced at Dora, who flashed the FBL man a lazy, provocative smile.

Greeley flushed. For a few seconds he seemed to be concentrating on his breathing. “Look here, Billig,” he said finally, “don't get the idea that either I or the government feels anything but loathing and detestation for you. Fun Incorporated has corrupted a third of a nation, and we have your headquarters here and in twenty cities so well cordoned a wasp couldn't get out. The sole reason we haven't smashed you is that you tell us you've captured something that is a little more dangerous to America than even your rotten organization. But our patience is wearing thin. We suspect a bluff, in spite of those green hairs you sent us. Make a deal while you can."

“The chemical and physical analysis of the hair must have shown your experts something very interesting,” Billig murmured with a reflective smile. “Like you say, Mr. Greeley, we have something you can't do without. Something worth roughly—shall we say a third of a nation? It seems to me that we are letting you off very cheaply. Consider what the Russkies might be willing to pay. So I'm afraid the witnesses are an essential part of the exchange. In fact, I'm certain."

“I'm warning you,” Greeley flared, “that I'm in full charge of Project Kitty under Emmet and that I've advised Emmet and the president to break off the deal and raid if you insist on that condition."

“You've advised,” Billig replied, “and you're under Emmet. I'm only interested in what Barnes and Emmet have advised."

Greeley looked as if he wished he were deaf and dumb. His hands clenched and slowly unclenched. He set himself to speak.

Just then a phone-light blinked. Moe Brimstine snatched it up, obviously prepared to roar out a rebuke and slam it down. Instead he listened silently, and kept on listening. Greeley watched him intently.

At that moment, Phil heard the soft kiss of a door slitting open and faint footsteps drabber in quality than the binaural richness of the stuff he'd been listening to. He looked down the straight dark corridor on his side of the panel. Some forty feet down it, where it ended in a T, light now flooded across. Then Phil saw Dr. Romadka cross the corridor at that point. The analyst was still carrying his black bag. In the other hand was a gun. He disappeared from sight.

“You better take this, Mr. Billig."

Phil switched around just in time to see Billig grab the phone from Brimstine with a glare. “Three of them?” Billig's words were staccato. “And a fourth man and a girl, they said? And what did they tell you the fourth man wanted? I don't care if it sounds silly! *What?"*

Holding the phone, Billig spared Greeley a glance. “We're going to have to delay making final arrangements for a few minutes,” he said curtly. “Dora will entertain you."

“You can't delay,” Greeley assured him with a sudden note of triumph. “The raid starts in ten minutes unless I return. Besides, there's only one thing important enough to make you interrupt this interview. You've lost the green cat, or you're afraid you have."

“I know Emmet would allow more time than that, even if he didn't tell you,” Billig snapped back at him. “Put Benson in charge of him, Brimstine. Then come back."

“Let me contact Emmet,” Greeley said quickly. “We'll cooperate with you fully in finding the cat. You have my word the indictments will be quashed."

“Word! Take him out,” Billig said sharply.

Greeley, lifting his elbow contemptuously away from Brimstine's hand, started with him out of the room. Dora accompanied them. Greeley pointedly edged away from her.

“Don't be frightened, lambie,” the violet blonde told him, “I'm just bound for the little girl's room."

Billig lifted the phone. But before he'd quite got it to his ear and mouth, the skin around his eyes contracted with sudden suspicion and he gazed toward Phil, or rather toward a point near Phil, so sharply that the latter would have sprinted off, except he could not decide for a second which way.

Then the spread two first fingers of Billig's right hand struck like a serpent's fangs at two buttons.

Lights flared around Phil, everything was suddenly very still, and Phil saw himself in a bright mirror that hid Billig and halved the length of the room. His reflection, although fully clothed, had the expression of a man caught naked in public. He hesitated for another desperate second, frozen by the thought that the mirror was one great eye, then ran down the straight corridor. He came to the T and whisked around the comer in the direction Romadka had gone, until he heard footsteps ahead and pounding toward him. He darted back the way Romadka had come and found himself in a brightly lit room chiefly occupied by a heavy copper cage with less than an inch between the bars.

But one corner of the cage had been neatly sliced off and rested on the floor beside it like a little three-sided orange tent. Phil looked around for a way out and saw nothing but bright white wall marred only by a deep cut in the same plane as the slice through the cage. His circling look ended at the door through which he'd come. Mr. Billig and Moe Brimstine were standing in it. Brimstine held a stun-gun, Mr. Billig a larger weapon which, while pointing at at Phil, he held carefully out from his side.

“All right,” Billig said, “what have you done with the green cat?"

XII

IT couldn't have been three minutes since Phil's capture, yet it seemed that he had been listening to Mr. Billig for years. He was sitting apprehensively on a stool in a long low room to which he had been conducted by two men in sober sports togs—obviously a cut above company guards—whom Mr. Billig addressed as Harris and Hayes. Along one of the long sides of the room were windows and a doorway leading onto a balcony of some sort, beyond which yawned perplexing darkness. Harris and Hayes stood behind Phil while Billig paced in front of him.

Just now the voice that was like a tape played at triple speed, but not so high-pitched, was saying, “Have you ever pictured $10,000,000 concretely? Think of it this way: a yacht on the Amazon, bubble-dome cabin, your private copter, a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead, yourself absolute monarch of a very interesting microcosm. Doesn't it appeal to you?"

“But I didn't take the green cat,” Phil replied quickly—Billig's speed was catching. “I don't know where it is."

“What do you want then?” Billig demanded. “Or like most people, are you afraid to say? Tell me, I've heard everything."

Phil opened his mouth, thought of Lucky, and said nothing.

“Hit him, Harris,” Billig ordered, “and don't be all day about it!"

Pain bounced like a steel ball back and forth inside Phil's skull at Harris’ dispassionate swipes. At the last one Phil felt his head go numb and his thoughts glassy. Harris’ bank cashier face swam out of sight, to be replaced by Billig's smooth mask with its lurking host of wrinkles.

Billig produced the gun he'd been carrying when Phil was caught. He informed Phil, “I propose to cut your limbs off, one by one. The beam burns, which keeps you from bleeding too fast."

All Phil's glazed mind could think was how ludicrous the word “limb” was. He wondered if Billig considered him a tree. Billig's head persisted in circling Phil like a small planet, though that may only have been the room swimming. Suddenly Phil stuck out an arm.

“All right,” he informed Billig, “Begin with this. Don't hurt the leaves."

Billig lowered the gun. “You hit him too hard,” he told Harris, “or else he likes it. There are other kinds of pain. Where's Brimstine? I told him he had

only two minutes to find Jack. Hayes, frisk this man."

Slim fingers rippled through Phil's pockets and tossed Billig commonplace items. When the hand went for his right hand pocket, Phil had a belated memory and made a move to prevent it, but Harris grabbed his arms from behind.

Hayes carefully handed Billig the figurine of Mitzie Romadka in black, off the bosom frock.

Billig rattled softly to Hayes, “I'd swear this is Mary what's-her-name's work—the girl who used to do strip-tease dolls for us. She always had a touch and now it's got better.” He fingered the doll delicately, studying the reactions in Phil's face. “Do you want her?” he asked suddenly. “Would it pain you to see her hurt?” He made as if to wring the doll's head off, then quickly set it on a table beside him and threw up his hands. “Where *is* Brimstine!"

“Here,” the latter announced, hulking into the room like a bear in a great hurry. “I've located Jack. And we've caught the girl the three hep-jerks blabbed about. She lined herself up with the dress-display robots and might have passed herself off as one, but she sneezed."

Mitzie was marched into the room, her hands twisted behind her by Dora, whose face wore a disdainful smile that now seemed spiced with cruelty. The analyst's daughter had lost her evening cape and her long dark hair hung half over one eye. She held her chin up, as one who has struggled, found it no use, yet not really submitted. She saw Phil and looked away from him proudly, as if her being caught had wiped out the problem into which he had plunged her.

“Ah, the original,” Billig observed, looking up from the figurine, which he deftly pocketed. “Darling,” he said, walking toward Mitzie, “would you care to be featured in coast-to-coast living ads, or sit for a line of ultra deluxe dress display robots; would you like to be a handie star, ambassadress to Brazil, or become my girl Friday and be in on everything interesting that goes on in the world; would you take $10,000,000? Just tell us what you've done with the green cat."

Mitzie answered the five-second barrage with a shrug of her upper lip. “Darling, I'm serious,” Billig assured her. “This is a lifetime opportunity and you're a nice girl.” And he made as if to caress her shoulder affectionately, but instead whipped around to catch Phil's reaction.

Jack Jones ran into the room and whisked to a stop. He glanced at Phil as if he didn't know him and then saluted Billig sardonically.

“What are you standing around for?” Billig demanded. “Get to work. Hayes, I want those three hep-jerks in here."

Phil tried to squirm away from Harris’ seemingly casual grip. And then Jack's fingers were digging at nerves and pain was not a steel ball but a fiery plant's red hot roots and million rootlets finding an instant way through every crevice between the cells of his body. He heard himself squealing, “Romadka! Romadka!” The pain lessened and he babbled swiftly, “Dr. Romadka stole the cat. I saw him coming out of the room where the cage is, carrying his black bag. The cat must have been inside."

“Who's this Romadka?” Billig whipped at him.

“An analyst,” Phil gasped weakly. He nodded at Jack Jones. “He can tell you about him."

“I never heard of the man,” Jack asserted instantly.

“You did,” Phil mumbled desperately. “You saw how he was after me tonight. You must have guessed he was after the green cat."

Jack shook his head curtly. “He's making it up,” he assured Billig.

Across the room Brimstine put down a phone and called to Billig, “Benson says Greeley's acting cool as they come, still confident the raid will start when he said."

“Well, don't freeze!” Billig rapped exasperatedly at Jack. “Get back to work on him."

As the small terrible hands approached, Phil looked imploringly at Mitzie.

“Dr. Anton Romadka is my father,” she said coldly, “reputed to be a great psychoanalyst. This hysteric you're wasting time on is one of his patients."

“Darling, why didn't you say so before?” Billig asked her joyfully. “Dora, let go of her wrists at once!” The violet blonde complied with a cynical hop of her slim eyebrows.

“Darling, it escaped my mind she was still doing that, I'm sorry,” Billig assured Mitzie as he glided towards her, his feet moving almost as glibly as his tongue. “Darling, it's very clear to me now: this hysteric, as you accurately describe him, stole the cat on your father's orders and handed it to your father, whom I can see you don't like and who probably forced you to come along. Now just tell us where your father is, or where you think he

is, darling, and you'll have, not one, but all of those things I mentioned to you a half minute back."

"My father hasn't skill enough to burgle a banana-vending robot," Mitzie snapped at him. "You're as stupid and conceited and unbalanced as all men, only faster. You think because something clever has been done, a man must have done it. My father's a rotten analyst, but you could use a few sessions with him."

"Darling, we're not going to get anywhere if you talk that way," Billig assured her laughingly. "Realize it, darling, you're among friends and well-wishers." And he took her arm with a paternal amiability.

Mitzie's right hand was a blurred are and Billig sashayed back with four bright red lines on his left cheek.

"Grab her, Dora!" Billig ordered. The violet blonde willingly wrapped her arms around Mitzie's waist and elbows. Mitzie avoided noticing it. Meanwhile, Billig was rapid firing, "I assumed she was disarmed, Brimstine. Get those claws off her." Brimstine grabbed Mitzie's right hand around the knuckles with one of his big paws and began to jerk off the needle-fanged thimbles. Billig waved off Harris, who had let go Phil to offer to minister to his boss's dripping cheek.

Billig paced back toward Mitzie. "Darling," he said, and for once the words came slow, "you're really wonderful, you're just the sort of charming vixen the sadisto-hackers dream up to torture the hero. But tonight I'm afraid you're going to have to reverse roles."

Phil's mysterious inward tormentor who had made him go up against Moe Brimstine at the Akeleys', now got to work again and despite the weakness of his pain-threaded muscles, forced him to start a staggering rush at Billig, meanwhile calling out, "Don't you touch her!"

Naturally Jack tripped him, caught him by the collar almost before he'd painfully smashed into the flooring, and slammed him back onto the stool.

At that moment, Hayes and four or five other men, the latter in the company guard costume of the half-headless man, marched a banged up Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck into the far end of the room. Carstairs, who now had blood as well as hair trailing down his forehead, looked steadily at Mitzie.

"Thank you for this, Mitz," he said rather quietly.

Llewellyn and Buck each nodded his head.

“You take it for granted I skunked on you?” Mitzie asked. None of the three acted as if they'd heard the question.

Phil, watching Billig, noted a very slight shiver, smile, and widening of the eyes, although the boss man of Fun Incorporated wasn't looking at anything in particular.

“Take those boys down to the company garage,” Billig called to Hayes; keeping his slashed cheek turned away. “I'll phone you orders about them in fifteen seconds.” Then, as Hayes and the guards jumped to obey, Billig said to Mitzie in a voice just loud enough to reach Carstairs, “Thanks again, darling. That was a nice job."

Carstairs had time to give her one last deadly look before he was hurried out with the others.

“Come on, everybody,” Billig said gayly, “we're going to have a little show. Darling, would you like to take my arm? I've quite forgotten that love tap. If you promise to be a good girl, I'll tell Dora to let go of you.” Mitzie made no reply but Dora unwrapped her arms with lazy reluctance. “Come on, darling,” Billig entreated, starting for the balcony. Mitzie didn't look at him, but she walked at his side. He didn't try to touch her. They moved fast. Billig looked back over his shoulder.

“Hurry up, everybody,” he ordered exasperatedly. “Stop acting slow-motion!"

Brimstine, Dora and Harris quickly fell in behind them. Jack brought up the rear with Phil.

“I had to do that,” Jack whispered in Phil's ear. “I couldn't take it and trust you to fake reactions well enough to fool Billig. But for God's sake, don't spill anything more about Romadka. I know you're Juno's lover. Well, Romadka made me bring him here. His friends are at the house. They'll kill Mary and Sacheverell—Juno and Cookie, too—if he gets caught."

As Phil was trying to formulate some sort of answer to this, they followed the others onto the balcony. Its railing was split by a gateway, from which a metal stairway projected down and out into the darkness, its first dozen treads glimmering faintly.

Without warning Mitzie left Billig and darted down the stairs, taking them three at a time. Harris lunged after her, but Billig stopped him with a gesture. “She's doing what I want,” he explained softly, “and five times faster than if you dragged her. Won't you ever understand it's speed I need?"

Brimstine was closely watching Mitzie, who was now no more than a glimmering moth flitting through a duller darkness. “She can't see the steps any more,” he said with professional admiration. “That girl's good."

Billig shrugged and stepped to a control panel in the railing. He picked up a phone, then paused thoughtfully as if he were making sure it was a full fifteen seconds since he had spoken to Hayes and not a mere twelve or thirteen.

“Hayes?” Billig said, and then whispered rapidly. He paused for a moment, writhing his eyebrows, as though Hayes were being unbelievably slow in catching on. “Of course, of course!"

Then Billig touched a button and blinding light transformed the darkness into a huge, empty, gray garage, its floor some thirty feet below the balcony. There were all sorts of lines and signs indicating which way cars should move and park, only there weren't any cars. There were also a dozen open gateways in the gray walls, eight of them marked “Exit.” The silvery stairs down which Mitzie had flown touched the center point of the garage's vast floor. A few paces away from that, Mitzie stood tiny and stock-still, as if blinded by the light.

Somewhere, far off, an electric motor was revving up.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Billig said to Dora, Brimstine, Harris, and Jack, but mostly to Phil, “this is the place where people park their cars while they watch the wrestling bouts. But now the wrestling's over and the cars are gone.” He delicately touched his cheek, where the four furrows had almost stopped bleeding. “So now we can have the place for our little show. Mr. Gish, I must have the green cat. I believe you value that girl's beauty and life—"

But Phil, whose arms were gripped hard by Jack from behind, hardly heard him he was watching Mitzie so intently. She seemed to come out of her daze suddenly. Dark, close bars shot down and blocked it, as they did all the other gateways Phil could see. He looked at Billig and saw his dark fingers lifting from buttons. He looked back at Mitzie and saw her hesitate and then run back toward the silvery stairs. Billig touched another button and the stairs retracted, telescoping upward. Mitzie stood on the gray floor all alone.

The revving of the unseen motor grew louder. Billig leaned over the guard wall and looked thoughtfully at Mitzie, as if he were a cleverer

Caligula, a more practical Nero. Then he turned back, and took the figurine of Mitzie out of his pocket, and spoke to Phil.

"Mr. Gish," he said, "I seriously want to know where the green cat is, or where your Dr. Romadka has taken it. Otherwise, how would you like this to happen to her down there?" And he jerked off a leg of the figurine. Phil could see the twin ragged cones of wax where the leg had parted. "Or this?" Billig jerked off an arm. "Or this or this?"

At that moment an open topped black jeep came accelerating out from under the balcony. Phil saw there were three people in it, though for a moment he couldn't tell who. But Mitzie darted to the car, calling out excitedly, "Carstairs!" The car came on. "You're wonderful?' Mitzie called. But then suddenly the car came forward faster and straight toward her, and she had to dive out of the way to keep from being hit.

The car started to swing around in a great loop. Mitzie picked herself up from the harsh floor.

"Or *this!*" Billig hissed at Phil, and he ripped the figurine apart at the waist, while one thumb made a smashed flatness of the tiny breasts. "Now please tell me where's this Dr. Romadka."

"I don't know!" Phil yelled, struggling to get away from Jack, who maddeningly whispered in his ear, "That's right, don't spill a word."

"I'll remind you," Billig continued swiftly, taking something else from under his coat, "that it's much more worse for her—or anyone—to be hurt by people she idolizes than by people she hates. So tell me about the green cat. Look here, this is an ortho. I can cut down that car any moment you tell me."

But Phil, like all the others, was watching Mitzie. Having picked herself up, she didn't move. She simply stayed there, facing the oncoming car. When it was so close that for an instant Phil saw Mitzie's dark head against its chrome muzzle, it veered and missed her by a breath. Mitzie stood motionless as a statue, though her short skirt whipped out.

Then she turned at the waist and watched the retreating jeep.

"Chicken!" she jeered, loudly.

For an instant everyone on the balcony was very still. Then there was a dull banging, and Phil realized that Moe Brimstine was pounding the railing, and saying, "I tell you, that girl's good."

“Yes, she is,” Billig buzzed at him curtly. Brimstine stopped his applause, looking ashamed.

“But,” Billig continued smoothly, turning to Phil, “they're bound to get her, sooner or later, unless...” And he wiggled the large black gun he held in his small hand. “So you better talk."

The jeep swung round under the balcony in a much tighter loop and headed back, revving screamingly. Mitzie faced it, grinning, hands as light on her hips as before.

Then, just as—from Phil's point of view—it had swallowed her up to the waist, she sprang to one side. Phil felt her foot must have brushed the tire. The jeep slammed through the air where she'd been.

"Dumb-bell!” Mitzie screamed.

Brimstine lifted his clenched fists above the railing, glanced at Billig, and with an effort dropped them to his sides. Phil realized his arms were numb, Jack was gripping them so tightly. Beyond Billig, Harris and Dora leaned forward over the guard rail, as abstracted as gamblers.

But Billig himself, though presumably a gambler, was neither still nor intent. “Look, Mr. Gish,” he said rapidly, “I don't want to see this girl smashed myself, and Brimstine here is figuring on starring her in a knife throwing or dodge-the-car act. This is probably the last chance you have to save her. Where's Romadka? Where's the cat?"

A phone-light began to blink on the control panel. Billig ignored it. *"Where's the cat?"* he repeated.

But all Phil could think, as the black jeep turned very tightly by the far wall and as Mitzie pivoted to face it—all he could think was that this had happened before, in ancient Crete, where girls as slim waisted and dark haired as Mitzie had faced the black, charging bull and dodged it or vaulted or somersaulted over its cruel horns, their breasts as bare as Mitzie's, opposing the most tender thing in the world to the most terrible.

The phone-light continued to blink.

The jeep finished its tight turn, Llewellyn and Buck leaning out to balance it like a sailboat while Carstairs stuck steady as death behind the wheel. Then it shrieked toward Mitzie. She waited until it was almost as close as the time before, then sprang toward the left. Quickly, almost as if it were tied to her thoughts, the jeep veered toward the left, too. But Mitzie's

feet, slamming down after that first jump, didn't carry her farther, but reversed her direction, carrying her back to the spot she'd first occupied.

Again the jeep slammed past her.

"*Double dumb-bell!*" Mitzie howled.

The jeep, screaming into another tight turn, vanished under the balcony. There was a grating crash, then a sick, rasping sound, as if the jeep had sideswiped the wall but was still going.

At the same moment a dark shouldered but pink topped figure walked out rapidly from under the balcony. It was carrying a black bag. It stopped, leaned over, set the black bag on the floor, and opened it.

The black jeep came out from under the balcony, limpingly but gaining speed.

Something green and small stuck its head out of the black bag and looked toward the jeep.

The jeep didn't stop, but it slowed, and Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck tumbled out and sprinted away from the green head as if from horror itself.

The jeep continued very slowly and haltingly toward Mitzie, like a blinded, badly injured animal.

The pink topped figure walked rapidly and mechanically back under the balcony, as if it didn't understand the why of what it had been doing. Belatedly, Phil realized it must be Dr. Romadka.

The phone-light went on blinking.

The green cat leaped out of the black bag and lightly settled itself beside it.

"Stun it!" Billig knifed at Brimstine and Harris.

The green cat twisted its neck and looked up curiously.

Brimstine and Harris looked at Billig and each took a step and peered down over the railing and stopped stock-still. Behind them Dora was as pale and quiet as a ghost.

And then Phil felt it too—the same invisible golden wave of amiability and understanding as had quieted the quarrelers at the Akeleys', but now in a flood, a spring tide.

"Stun that thing down there!" Billig demanded. The hidden wrinkles were showing themselves twitchingly on his face and he was backing away from the railing as if he couldn't bear the golden wave.

Brimstine started to reach inside his coat, but instead picked up the phone beside the blinding light. After a moment he said quite casually, “The raid's begun, just as Greeley told us it would. The FBL are coming in everywhere."

“Stun it, I tell you! Get it somehow; it can save us,” Billig ordered, frantically fanning the air in front of his face as if to beat off the golden wave.

Harris just looked at him. Brimstine slowly and puzzledly shook his head.

Billig gave a shuddering gasp and clapped his free hand over his mouth and nostrils, as if the golden wave were something breathed in with the air, and fought his way to the railing. With his other hand he raised the big gun until it was high above his shoulder.

A needle of blue light jutted from either end of the big gun and made smoking trenches in the opposite wall of the garage and the wall behind them. Then Billig brought the gun steadily downward, lengthening the forward and rearward trenches. The air smelled acid, as if laced with ozone. The blue beam dimmed the bright lights and made everything shadowy.

The green cat still looked up at Billig curiously. Billig didn't look straight back at it. The little muscles in his jaw and temple bulged around the hand clamping shut his mouth and nose.

The forward trench dug itself across the wall and floor, swung drunkenly past Mitzie and the doddering jeep, got ten feet from the green cat and hesitated. It swung this way and that, as if it had encountered a magic circle it couldn't pierce—and stopped.

Jack murmured, “Sash was right."

Billig gave a great gasp and began to squeal.

The blue beams winked out. The gun clanked on the floor. The squeal changed to a clucking and Billig swayed. Jack jumped to catch him.

Phil sprang forward and his fingers touched buttons he'd seen Billig touch. The bars in the garage gateways shot up. Phil was on the telescoped stairs almost before they began to move, and rode them to the ground through layers of stinging ozone and golden harmony. The jeep had trembled to a stop just short of Mitzie, who stared at it groggily, her whole figure slack, as if a puff of wind could have felled her.

When the stairs touched the floor, momentum carried Phil forward a half dozen steps but he kept his footing and circled back at a run. When he

plunged into the area between the green cat and the spot where the jeep had been abandoned, he felt a shiver of sudden and extreme terror, which even as he felt it, began to fade.

But he hardly had time to ask himself whether that was what had stampeded Carstairs and the rest, for the next instant he was calling, “Lucky!” and Lucky was saying “Prrt!” and he was scooping up the unresisting cat, his fingers trembling as they touched the green fur, and darting back toward Mitzie and the jeep. Her groggy look had now become a dazed smile of triumph and pride.

He grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her toward the jeep. “Get in!” he shouted in her ear. “We're getting out of here. You're driving."

A little life seemed to come back into her as her hands touched the wheel. She kicked the starter as he scrambled in beside her, Lucky gently clutched to his chest. “Which way?” she asked thickly.

“Any exit gateway,” he told her.

With a rather wheezy hum, the jeep started toward the nearest gateway. Phil felt a thinning of the golden peace around them, as if, he told himself, Lucky were resting. The jeep, though gaining a little speed, seemed to move as slowly as a school slideway. But looking back, he saw that the group on the balcony was still standing as motionless as dress display dummies with the power off all except Billig, who was once again moving about rapidly.

“Get them,” Phil could barely hear Billig's cracked voice implore, as he darted from one to the other. “Kill them."

The jeep nosed through the high doorway and started up a ramp.

“Dora!” Phil heard Billig yell. “Grab my ortho and kill them."

The effect of the golden wave must be wearing off, Phil thought, for just as the top of the gateway was cutting off his view he saw the violet blonde stoop rapidly behind the guard wall.

The next second a blue beam flashed, and smoke and starry splatter sprayed up just behind the jeep. The beam moved up and encountered the top of the gateway. It noticed that, came a little closer to them, and then was stopped by the thickness of the wall. The ramp turned and Phil saw a half dozen men in the Fun Incorporated company guard uniform. Two of them had drawn their guns and the other four hadn't. They turned and saw the jeep. The two with guns raised them and the others reached for theirs.

Then Lucky sat up on Phil's lap straight as the statuette of Bast, and Phil felt him let go of another of those great golden invisible waves. Phil could tell the moment it hit the guards from the sudden change in their tough faces. They watched the jeep with awe and incredulous grins as it went past.

Farther on they found themselves approaching an expanse of gray cold light, against which a party of some twenty heavily armed men was partly silhouetted, although they were advancing warily along the walls. They were carrying guns, nets and sprays that could swiftly immobilize men in plastic cocoons, and what looked like bird cages.

They leveled their weapons, but once again and mightier than ever, so mighty it made Phil shiver with understanding, the golden wave rolled forward to engulf them. Once again the jeep glided past astonished, troubled faces that smiled in spite of themselves. As the jeep rolled out into the cool, shadowy dawn, Phil stroked Lucky's soft, springy fur and murmured, “Little peace maker. You even gentled the FBL."

Lucky looked up at him coquettishly and then yawned tremendously and curled up on Phil's lap. The feeling of golden harmony subsided until only a ghost of it lingered.

“I know,” Phil said, “you're tired from so much peace making.” He suddenly felt extremely tired himself, yet he went on to say, in slurred syllables, “Lucky, I don't care whether you come from Egypt, Russia, or the jungles of the Amazon—you're good for the USA."

XIII

THE jeep steadily turned corners, putting block after block of the empty, early morning, upper level streets between it and Fun Incorporated. Phil wondered whether it could be traced by the electric eyes that were said to be at each intersection, but he forgot the question before it became a worry. Lucky was a plump green doughnut on his lap. He felt over-poweringly sleepy and wished he could gently slide into some universe lacking light, sound and gravity.

But before drifting off he glanced at Mitzie. Her face was set in hard, proud, sneering lines, although two tears were jiggling down her cheeks. Phil felt more annoyed than surprised or compassionate. No one, he told himself, had the right to indulge such a mood in Lucky's presence.

He decided that Mitzie needed to have certain truths rubbed in gently. “Our escape is nothing to puff ourselves up over,” he said softly. “Lucky did it all. Though I admired your bravery dodging the jeep."

Mitzie didn't look at him, but she thinned her lips.

“The episode of the jeep was instructive,” Phil went on, beginning to twist the angelic knife just a little. “It showed you exactly what sort of glorious criminal fellowship you had with those three hep-thugs. But now,” he went on, tempering justice with mercy, “you've discovered that your romantic worship of evil isn't worth a fingersnap in the face of true love and understanding. Eh, Mitzie?"

Mitzie let the car jog listlessly to a stop. Phil was dimly aware that they were parking in a bumpy, blind end driveway in a neglected, shrubby square with tall buildings set around. He leaned back, smiling drowsily, his fingers playing with Lucky's springy fur. He was waiting complacently for Mitzie's sobs.

Instead, the seat jounced and the door of the jeep slammed.

He looked around. Mitzie was standing outside the jeep against a shadowy background of tangled shrubbery and misty, silent skyscrapers.

Suddenly she leaned forward toward him, bracing herself against the door with stiff arms. She inhaled gustily and her small, tender breasts lifted in their black satin half cups.

Now, he told himself, it must happen. She must yield, sobbing, to Lucky's power.

“I hate you, Phil,” she said intensely. “You want to see me turn to jelly.” New tears spurted from the inside corners of her eyes, but her expression grew fiercer. “Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck may have tried to kill me, but at least they gave me a chance to be something. They allowed me the dignity of being hated. They didn't try to drown me in slop.

“I want glory,” she went on in a voice that certainly should have sounded choked except she simply wouldn't permit it. “I want my kind of glory, no matter how cheap and selfish you think it is, because it's the only thing that's shining and brave in a shoddy, cowardly world. I want to spit in the world's eye and then face it, when it comes bleating for revenge, like I faced this jeep."

“I did think you were courageous there,” Phil temporized, wondering why the devil Lucky's power, that had softened twenty men at a crack, was so slow in taking effect on a single misguided girl.

“Spare me any praise that's a cover for slop,” Mitzie said scathingly. “Oh I know what that Sunday school beast there on your lap can do, and I know what you want to see happen. I have only one thing that's titanium in me, all the rest is stinking mush. You want to see that one thing break. No, worse, you want to see it soften. Well, I'm not going to let that happen.” She stood up and took her hands off the door.

Suddenly Phil felt a kind of sleepy worry. He ran his hand over Lucky's fur, then shook him hesitatingly. “Wake up,” he said uneasily.

Lucky merely purred. Or perhaps it was a small snore.

“Goodbye for good, Phil,” Mitzie said, turning away.

“No, wait,” Phil called suddenly, at last hunching groggily forward in his seat. “Don't go yet.” He shook Lucky again, almost roughly. “Wake up,” he demanded. “Stop her."

The small god hung in his hands like a limp green rag.

Phil put Lucky down on the seat beside him and started to get out of the car. But abruptly a wave of deep melancholy washed over him. He knew that something precious was slipping away from him, but he wasn't sure it was genuinely precious and he didn't know whether he had the right to stop it. Besides his god had failed him and he was incredibly sleepy.

So he watched Mitzie slipping away from him as irrevocably as time, and did nothing except lift Lucky back on his lap. He watched her stride off along the misty shrubs like a proud and angry nymph, holding her back straight and her head very high, and also, he supposed, those charming and ridiculous breasts with which she insisted on facing the whole world.

For what seemed a long time he watched the dim, empty corner around which she had turned. He was frozen in a hypnotic daze that temporarily served for sleep. Now and then thoughts crossed his mind's dull expanse, but they were shadowy things and did not linger. Once it occurred to him that Lucky might have been unable to hold Mitzie because his earlier exertions had drained his powers; small gods couldn't be expected to exude several great golden waves without suffering some slight after effects.

It occurred to him that at this very moment he must be the object of furious searches by the Federal Bureau of Loyalty, Fun Incorporated's natty thugs, Romadka and his jolly friends, perhaps even good old Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck. Yet he felt neither fear nor any inclination to form a plan. The dim corner he was watching grew brighter but stayed empty.

Four feet defined themselves in the doughnut-shaped pressure on his lap. Lucky stretched, shook himself, looked up at Phil with the brightest sort of eyes, and said, “Prrrrt-prt."

“You're a fine sort of cat,” Phil complained grumpily, his own eyes feeling anything but bright. “Going to sleep just when I needed you most."

Lucky disregarded these criticisms. “Prrrt-prt,” he repeated peremptorily.

But now that his hypnotic daze was broken, Phil once again felt overpoweringly sleepy. “I know that mew,” he mumbled muzzily at the green blur beyond the shimmering fence of his eyelashes. “You're hungry. Well, I s'pose you deserve a feed after all the wonders you did. But I haven't got any cranberry sauce right now. I'll get you something to eat ... later ... on."

“Prrrt-prt!” Lucky demanded in the outraged tones of an honest workman who finds himself cheated of his pay.

But Phil was beyond reach of any appeal. “G'night,” he told Lucky in the kindliest possible way and dropped off.

He dreamed of things far off and strange and ominous, though misty. He dreamed of dark fronded forests and small animals screeching. The

screeches grew louder and he fled out of his dream altogether into the jeep parked in the blind end driveway in the little square.

For a moment he seemed to see the ghosts of the dark fronded trees and hear the echo of the dream screeches, but then he realized that the former were the square's unpruned shrubs, while the latter were the squeals and cries of schoolgirls scattering out of a building beyond.

He realized groggily that they must be coming from school—no, from afternoon school, since the sunlight wasn't slanting at all deeply into the square, and that he must have slept here undisturbed all day.

And then, he became aware that his lap and heart were cold and that Lucky was gone.

XIV

PHIL'S first impulse was to jump out of the jeep and hunt around. But the chill in his heart told him Lucky was farther away than that. Besides, the place was a regular jungle and one man could hunt through it forever for anything cat-size.

He did not recognize the square at all, but he guessed from the schoolgirls that he was in an intellectual residential neighborhood. At first he thought the school was one for girls, but then he noticed a few lone boys among the homeward-bound students and decided that most of the families in this area must be deliberately having as many girls as possible. When sex-determination had become possible through centrifuging human sperm to separate the male-producing and female-producing types, most parents decided to have sons, especially for their firstborn. They often told themselves they would have daughters later, but unfortunately small families were the rule. The resulting over-production of males had led to some ineffectual state laws forbidding sex-determination, an unsuccessful attempt at self-regulation by the medical profession, a lot of talk in Congress, and an almost fanatically determined movement among a class of thoughtful people to produce only daughters. This last class, besides seeking to balance the sex ratio, perhaps had in mind the fact or rumor that human parthenogenesis had been achieved. Phil remembered a Sunday afternoon video shock talk: *Will Women Born of Virgins Become Our Only Intellectuals?*

Other aspects of the neighborhood around the square fitted with his guess. There was an appearance of shabbiness, the skyscrapers were low, advertisements lifeless, traffic was light, there were no hot rods.

He let his gaze roam over the tiers of tiny flats, wondering where Lucky might have gone. As he did so, he turned on the jeep's radio. “...while Mystery Man Billig, mastermind of Fun Incorporated, is believed to have fled the country. Tonight at 8:30 New Washington Time, President Barnes will address all us American folks, partly to silence the small, syndicate-inspired clamor at the outlawing of male-female wrestling and jukebox burlesque, but more to explain to an amazed citizenry the full reasons behind the charges brought this morning by the federal government against

sixty-nine high officials, I predict—and remember this is just my personal libel-free guess, fellow-folks—that the president will reveal that Fun Incorporated has been peddling dream pills, temporary sterility tabs, and I'm as shocked and disgusted as you are, folks, female robots equipped for obscene functioning.

"Now here's an important flash on the cat story. The cats are not carrying an infection and are under no circumstances to be destroyed, whether owned, strayed, or alley. In fact, there's a stiff jail sentence waiting for any person destroying a cat. But all owned cats are to be brought to the nearest security station, while any person sighting a strayed or alley cat is directed to do the same. There's a stiff penalty for not doing the first, a one hundred dollar reward for doing the second. Get busy, kids! Why this sudden federal interest in cats? The National Health Service zips its lips. But your newscaster backs this highly responsible rumor: it has been discovered that a rare strain of cat carries a cancer destroying virus. Wouldn't it be nice, folkses, to know that, once full grown, you would never start to grow again, in any part or place?

"But remember this, dear audiers, and I'll say it to you in Martian: Zip-zap-zup! Meaning: Bring in the cats!

"Now as for this report, folks, that handie-supernova Zelda Zornia, vacationing in Brazil, did a south-of-the-equator handiecast advertising bathing jewelry; let me assure you clean living people..."

Phil cleared his mind, trying to put himself in Lucky's place, to feel the direction in which the cat had wandered off. His head swung doubtfully this way and that, like a compass needle or planchette, but finally came to rest. He climbed out of the jeep and walked straight ahead, not turning aside for the dusty, crackling shrubs, but pushing straight through them.

He parted a final straggly hedge and found himself looking across the empty street at a house quite as old as the Akeleys, but with free sky above it.

Built of ancient brick, it was three stories tall and looked as pompously respectable as a 19th century banker. It reposed sedately on a terrace that was as weedily overgrown as the square and that was surrounded by a high iron fence.

The only incongruous note was struck by a saucer-shaped object fully fifty feet across set on a framework atop the flat roof. Judging from the dull

green of its underside, it might be made of copper. It looked almost as old as the house and quite as proper, as if the 19th century banker had decided to wear a green beret and dared anyone to notice it.

Phil crossed the street, mounted some steps and peered through the iron gate. He made out, beside the houses old-fashioned, knob door, a tarnished bronze plate which read: “Humberford Foundation."

He looked back uneasily. Where he figured the jeep to be, he could see the heads and black-clad shoulders of two men. The black reminded him unpleasantly of the sports togs worn by Billig and his yes men. They seemed to be arguing. One of them took a step up, as if he were getting into the jeep, but the other pulled him back and they hurried off—not in his direction, Phil noted with some relief.

He gave the iron gate a little push. It opened with a rusty “Harrumph” that made Phil shrink apologetically. But nothing else happened so after a minute he slipped through and began to peer around at the undergrowth and then to wander through it, softly calling “Lucky!"

Occasionally he looked back in the direction of the jeep and once he saw the radio-helmeted heads and blue shoulders of three policemen. He wondered if the next time he looked he'd see Dr. Romadka or the Akeleys, or perhaps Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck, and he shivered to think of how close he'd come to being caught—by someone.

But the next shock he got came from something nearer. He had rounded the house, after having poked through its equally lifeless and overgrown back yard, when he saw a dark haired man peering at him through the fence.

The most disturbing thing about the man was that he closely resembled the girl Phil had watched undress in the room across from his. The girl with hoofs. This man had the same vital, faun-like expression.

Phil froze. But the man merely yawned, turned away, and shuffled off, humming or hooting a little melody that gave Phil goosepimples because it reminded him of something in his dream.

For that matter, the whole experience was becoming very dream-like to Phil: the silent house, the neglected garden, the futile searching, the melancholy memory of Mitzie's leave-taking, the powerful sense of a dead past. But the feeling that Lucky was near was still strong and after a bit Phil realized he would have to do something he had been shrinking from.

He reluctantly mounted the steps to the front portal, reached for the knob, and then, to put off the evil moment a little longer, called “Lucky!” a few times along the shallow porch to either side.

Someone behind him inquired pleasantly, “Are you looking for a cat?"

Phil spun around guiltily and found himself facing a very old man as tall and frail as a ghost, and apparently as silent as one, since Phil hadn't heard him coming up the walk. His thin, wrinkle-netted face, crowned by close cropped white hair, was hauntingly familiar. It had something of the grandeur of a pre-Christian ascetic, yet there was a note of Puckish humor in it, as if its owner had arrived at a wise second childhood. Although Phil's heart was pounding at the alarmingly accurate question, he found himself liking the man at first sight.

As he hesitated, the old man went on, “My interest, by the way, is purely academic—or else childish curiosity, which comes to the same thing.” His eyes flashed impishly. “Is it by any chance a green cat?” he asked Phil rapidly. “No, you don't have to answer that question, at least not any more than you have already. I don't want to distress you. It's just that I have a mind that automatically makes the far-fetched deductions first."

He beamed at Phil, who, though flustered, found himself grinning.

“Perhaps you're a journalist,” the oldster went on smoothly, “or at least we can pretend you are. Dr. Garnett always calls in the press when the Humberford Foundation makes a discovery, though I'm sorry to say the press stopped coming about twenty years ago. They'd quit thinking of para-psychology as newsworthy. But perhaps there's been time to breed a new race of journalists with a revived interest in esping and all the teles. In any case Garnett and the whole staff will be overjoyed at the presence of a pressman."

“You mean the Humberford Foundation investigates extrasensory perception and things like that?” Phil asked.

“You should know, since you've been sent here to get a story,” the old man said reprovingly. “Still, reporters often haven't the foggiest idea what they've been sent out to report, so you're excused."

Phil found himself grinning again. He hadn't any notion of how the old man knew about Lucky or where he stood in the general picture, except that he felt strangely certain that the old man didn't have anything to do with the organizations out to get Lucky. And the oldster's mischievous pretense that

Phil was a reporter might at least get him past the imposing door and let him spy around.

"So the Humberford Foundation has made a new discovery in parapsychology?" he said conversationally.

The other nodded. "Dr. Garnett was most excited. So much so that he didn't have time to tell me what it was all about, except that they'd started to get some amazing results—and just this morning. So I hurried over. Good esp is apt to go poof, so it's best to get it when it's hot. I have a standing order with Garnett to call me over the moment anything starts to flash. For that matter, I have the same orders with practically every scientific laboratory in the area—though the others don't always call me. But—thank Thoth!—Garnett isn't in a field that's under the benign aegis of security and he isn't at all security minded himself. In fact, I'm not certain he's ever heard of the FBL. So you may get a real scoop, Mr....?"

"Gish. Phil Gish."

The oldster's thin hand pressed his with a feathery touch. "Morton Opperly."

Phil stared at him for several seconds, then gasped, "The—?"

The other assented with an apologetic shrug. Phil let it sink in. This was Morton Opperly who had worked on the Manhattan Project, whose name had appeared beside Einstein's on the Physicists' Covenant, who had tried unsuccessfully to get himself jailed for refusal to do research during World War III, who had become a legend. Phil had always vaguely assumed he'd died years ago.

He gazed at the renowned physicist in happy awe. The question that rose effortlessly to his lips was a testimony to Opperly's ability to create an atmosphere of unlimited free discussion unknown since 1940.

"Mr. Opperly, what are orthos?"

"Orthos? That could be short for any number of scientific terms, Phil, but I bet you mean the ones that shoot. Those are orthos-fissionables. Trouble with ordinary fissionables—or fissionables under ordinary circumstances—is that the fragments and neutrons shoot off in all directions and the critical mass is large. But if you get the fissionable atoms all lined up with their axis of spin pointing in the same direction, then they all split in the same place and every neutron hits the nucleus of the atom next to it. Because of that last fact, the neutrons are all used up and the critical mass becomes

minute. Half the fragments fly in one direction, half in the other, making it a very nasty and convenient weapon, except it has to backfire."

"How do you get the atoms lined up?" Phil asked eagerly.

"Temperature near absolute zero and an electric field," Opperly said, touching a button beside the doorway. "Simplest thing in the world. The new insulators can hold a gun magazine at one degree Kelvin for weeks, and carry enough fissionable pellets to give rapid fire, with the effect of a steady beam, for more than a minute. Planning to make yourself an ortho in your home workshop, Phil? I'm afraid they don't sell that kit. Everything I've been telling you is top security, death penalty and all that. But I'm getting so senile I don't understand security regulations. I'm apt to babble anything. I keep telling Bobbie T. he'll have to have me orthocuted some day, but like everyone else he refuses to take me seriously. That's the trick they used on me in WW3 and they've never forgot it."

"Bobbie T.?"

Opperly made another of his apologetic grimaces. "Barnes. President Robert T. Barnes. We were charter members of the Midwest Starship Society. Of course he was just a shaver then and now he's a besotted, scripture quoting fox, but shared dreams have a way of linking people permanently. I drop in on him now and then and flash my Starship badge. He's one of my pipelines to what's happening in the world, though the security services don't tell him too much. That's how I learned about the green cat."

Phil was nerving himself to ask Opperly just what he'd learned, when he heard footsteps behind him.

The man who looked like a brother of the girl with hoofs was standing in the gateway.

Just then the door of the mansion opened, revealing a scholarly appearing man whose face was twitching with excitement and nervousness. His coat had two bulging brief case pockets, while his vest was crammed with enough microbooks to make up a dozen encyclopedias, plus two micronotebooks with stylus, and a fountain pen besides. His hair was graying and thin, and he wore ancient pince-nez that twitched with his nose.

"Dr. Opperly!" He greeted in a high-pitched voice that expressed both fluster and delight. "You come at a whirling moment!"

“That's the way I like them, Hugo,” Opperly told him. “Where's Garnett?"

But the other was looking at Phil, who decided the twitch was permanent. At the moment its owner was using it to express inquiry and mild apprehension.

“Oh,” Opperly said casually, “this is Phil Gish of the press.” His eyes twinkled. “Of the U. S. Newsmoon, in fact. Phil, this is Hugo Frobisher, Ph.Ch.—Chancellor of Philosophy, you know, the new higher degree. I'm just a lowly Ph.D. myself."

But Frobisher was beaming at Phil as if he were a donor with a $100,000 check. “This is most gratifying, Mr. Gish,” he breathed. Then he whipped out a micronotebook and poised on its white field the stylus whose movements would be reproduced on one ten thousandth of the space on the tape inside. “The U. S. Newsmoon, you say?"

At that moment the man at the gate came clumping up behind them. Phil felt a gust of uneasiness, but the newcomer merely treated them all to a big, innocent grin that brought out all the handsomeness of the faun-like face.

“Me press, too,” he announced happily. “Introducing to each you Dion da Silva. Much delight."

Frobisher seemed about to melt with gratification, though da Silva's gaiety was undoubtedly generally contagious. “What paper?” Frobisher asked.

Phil noted that Opperly was studying the newcomer intently. The latter was having trouble with Frobisher's question.

“Mean what?” he countered, drawing his shaggy eyebrows together in a frown.

"La Prensa," Opperly supplied suddenly. “Mr. da Silva represents *La Prensa."*

“Is so. Thank you,” da Silva confirmed.

Phil could have sworn that Opperly had never seen da Silva before and that da Silva had never heard of *La Prensa.*

However, Frobisher seemed to accept the explanation. “Come in, come in, gentlemen,” he urged, fluttering backward. “I'm sure you'll first want to tour our little establishment and have a peek at all our projects. Story background, you know."

“I'm sure they'll want to go straight to Garnett and get the story itself,” Opperly assured him. “Where is Winston anyway, Hugo?"

“To tell the truth, I haven't the faintest idea of Dr. Garnett's whereabouts,” Frobisher replied with prim satisfaction. “Things have been popping everywhere since this morning. In every project. We'd have to tour the Foundation to find him in any case."

Opperly flashed Phil a look of humorous resignation. Dion da Silva pressed past Phil, flashing his wide white teeth at everyone and saying, “Is fine, fine.” Phil's spirits rose. He felt certain that he was getting nearer to Lucky.

XV

INSIDE, the Humberford Foundation was a gloomy Edwardian mansion to which had been sketchily grafted a pleasantly disorganized scientific enterprise. Glassed shelves of leatherbound books that hadn't been opened for decades were elbowed by trim microfilm files. Blackened portraits of John Junius Humberford and his ancestors looked down on machines for shuffling the eternal Rhine cards and on fluorescent screens-in-depth that blended a dozen recordings of a brain wave made from different angles into the shadowy semblance of a human thought. Stately drawing rooms that set one thinking of bustles and teacups instead held solemn faced, scantily clad girls with electrodes attached to twenty parts of their bodies. Laboratory technicians in loose smocks caught their heels in stair carpets a hundred years old.

But today there was an excitement that pushed the Edwardian half of the place far into the background and brightened the very grime on the walls. Chancellor Frobisher and his little train of visitors were not even noticed. Girls triumphantly calling Rhine cards stared past them unseeingly. Clairvoyants sketching objects being imagined by someone else three floors away didn't look up from their blackboards. A technician darted out with a large syringe and took air samples under their very noses without seeming to be aware of their presence. Correlating engines hummed and spat cards.

Phil was so busy peering about for his green cat that he heard little of what Frobisher was telling them.

Occasional high pitched explanatory phrases floated back to Phil: “...her 117,318th run through the cards ... telepathic communion with lower animals ... perhaps some day share the thoughts of an amoeba ... No, I really don't know where Dr. Garnett is, I'm busy with important visitors, Miss Ames ... telekinesis will make handies obsolete..."

Plodding behind da Silva up the stairs to the top floor, Phil started to listen to Frobisher consecutively. The Chancellor of Philosophy was saying, “Now in the room I'm about to show you, an experiment in *complete* telepathy is underway. When telepathy is perfected, it will be possible for two individuals to lay their minds side by side and compare all their thoughts and feelings in the raw, as it were."

“Is good!” da Silva interjected.

Frobisher frowned at the interruption before remembering it was a journalist talking. He went on smilingly, “In this case, however, we have only a preliminary stage: two individuals, by means of prolonged speech, writing, sketching, musical expression and so forth, are attempting to share their inmost thoughts to such an extent that they will tend to become telepathic, as seems to be the case with some husbands and wives.” As they came to the top of the stairs, Frobisher continued a bit breathlessly, “Incidentally, the young man in this experiment is one of our most consistent espers, while the young lady is a handie bit player who graciously devotes her leisure time to science."

He paused with his hand on an ancient brass doorknob.

“Let's not disturb them, Hugo,” Opperly suggested a bit faintly, leaning against the wall though he showed no other effects of the climb. “Sounds like rather an intimate experiment."

Frobisher shook his head, “As I say,” he pronounced, “these two researchists are seeking to lay their minds side by side."

He opened the door, looked in, gasped, and hastily slammed it—though not before da Silva, peering over his shoulder, had emitted an appreciative and rather whinnying chortle.

“As I say, their *minds,"* Frobisher repeated, walking away from the door a bit unevenly. “Perhaps you're right, Dr. Opperly, we'd best not disturb them. Research is at times a strenuous affair.” He looked apprehensively at the purported representative of *La Prensa.* “I trust, Señor da Silva—"

“Is very good!” da Silva assured him enthusiastically.

Frobisher looked at him blankly, shook himself a bit and said briskly, “It now remains, gentlemen, to give you a glimpse of our crowning project—the one on the roof. If you'll just precede me up this circular staircase..."

“I think I'll stay here, Hugo,” Opperly told him. “Touring research can be strenuous too."

“But I rather imagine Dr. Garnett must be on the roof.”

“Then bring him down."

As Phil trudged up the musty cylinder lit by tiny bull's-eye windows, his feet clanking on worn metal treads, it occurred to him that Lucky certainly seemed to have been having a field day here, bringing people together in

understanding and love and what not. In fact, it made him rather jealous the way Lucky was strewing his favors around.

From behind Chancellor Frobisher's fussy voice filtered up. “I should preface this ascent by saying that one of J. J. Humberford's chief motives in establishing the Foundation was the conviction that mankind will soon destroy itself unless some superior power intervenes. So we feel bound to apply what little knowledge of esping we have gained to seeking such intervention. Even if there is only one chance in a million of contacting a superior power somewhere in the universe, the stakes are so great that we must not overlook the chance. Incidentally, gentlemen, please watch out for the next to the last step. There isn't any."

Phil, who was just putting his foot on it, caught himself, took a bigger step, and the next moment was out on the roof. The sodium mirror that orbited around earth was pouring sunlight down, though hardly enough to explain the dark glasses Frobisher handed him and da Silva.

Phil briefly studied the verdigris underside of the saucer topping most of the roof. He noted the flimsy looking beams supporting it and frowningly inspected the tiny penthouse under its center. Then Frobisher was urging him and da Silva up a ladder that led to a small platform next to the rim of the saucer.

Reaching the platform, Phil instantly realized the need for the dark glasses. The interior of the saucer was polished to such a degree that even the sodium-reflected sunlight flashed from it with a pale brown blindingness. He clamped his eyes shut and quickly put on the black specs.

“As you are aware,” Frobisher was saying, “the exact nature of thought waves is unknown. It may be that they move instantaneously, or at least at speeds far greater than that of light. We have yet to get a figure on them, although we have carefully timed thought-casts between here and Montevideo—but the human or physiological factor confounds us. They may not be waves at all. On the other hand it is possible that they are reflected and refracted like ordinary light."

“Is right,” interjected da Silva, a vague blur beside Phil, who hadn't yet got over the first blinding glimpse of the saucer's interior.

“You believe so?” Frobisher questioned sharply.

La Prensa's faun-like representative shrugged his muscular shoulders. “Just guessing,” he said.

“At any rate,” Frobisher continued, “we are working on that latter supposition here. This copper structure is a parabolic mirror. Thought waves originating at its focus are concentrated into a beam which is directed upward into the sky toward any stellar planetary systems which may happen to lie above."

“Amazing,” da Silva grunted. “Explains everything.”

“What do you mean?” Frobisher asked sharply.

“Just humble before wonders of science,” da Silva told him.

Frobisher nodded. “You're right,” he said. “Who knows but what the message now being beamed, with its appeal for help from a war-threatened and deluded humanity, may some day or century be received by a truly mature and benign race, which will swiftly come to our aid? By the by, Mr. Gish, watch that railing. It's broken."

Phil jerked his hand away from the rusted pipe. “Yes,” he said to Frobisher, “but how do these thought waves originate at the focus?"

“Just look,” Frobisher told him. Phil squintingly studied the gleaming saucer through his dark glasses and it became less of a jumble of highlights. Projecting from a hole in the center of the bowl was a brownish-red blob wearing goggles that looked as if they were made of a darker glass than his own specs. The blob's lips moved and Phil heard a hauntingly familiar voice saying, of all things, “S-O-S, earth. S-O-S, earth."

“Our star esper,” Frobisher chortled, “if you'll pardon a pun of which we're rather fond. To be sure, it's thought waves, not sound waves, he's originating, but it helps him esp if he says the message at the same time he thinks of it. He's a bit of an eccentric—a religious scholar—but that's the case with most of our best people."

At that moment Phil's vision, buffered by the dark glasses, became quite clear and he saw that the sweating head at the focus of the parabolic mirror was that of Sacheverell Akeley. At the same moment Sacheverell saw Phil and his sunburned top disappeared from the saucer as swiftly as a hand puppet jerked below stage.

“He shouldn't do that,” Frobisher said sharply. “There's at least twenty minutes of his duty remaining. Well, I presume you've seen all you'll need for your articles, gentlemen, so we'd best go down."

As Phil's foot touched the roof, Sacheverell Akeley darted up to him, sweat pouring off his ruddy-bronze forehead.

“What are you doing here?” Phil asked sharply. “How did you get away from them—Romadka's friends, I mean."

“They raced off a couple of hours after Romadka left,” Sacheverell answered quickly. “Got a phone call. Incidentally, Romadka abducted three of our cats. As for me, I've worked here for ages. The important point is,” he continued in an intense whisper, “that *he's* here, isn't he? I mean the Green One. I've never esped like this before, even at stars."

But before Phil could answer, Frobisher and da Silva glanced at them inquisitively. Phil and Sacheverell followed them down the metal staircase.

Reaching the top floor they found Opperly deep in conversation with a man who looked at least half out of this world. He was fat and had a beard, but his dull eyes seemed to be seeing twice as much as he was looking at. Sacheverell tugged at Phil's sleeve guardedly. “Garnett's frightfully espy,” he whispered, his lips next to Phil's ear.

“But Winnie, how do you explain it?” Opperly was saying. “Why all this success with esping, in practically all your projects, all of a sudden?"

Garnett frowned. “Well, there is one unusual circumstance. Our lab technicians claim to have found hormones, or some sort of specialized protein molecules floating around in the air."

“What hormones?” Opperly asked quickly.

“Well,” Garnett said, “they have had some difficulty identifying them.” He hesitated. “The hormones seem to show a tremendous variability—almost chameleon-like."

Opperly smiled and threw Phil a twinkling gaze.

“Winnie, do you by any chance know,” Opperly said, “whether an odd animal of some sort appeared at the Foundation early this morning?"

Phil felt Sacheverell's hand tighten on his biceps.

Dr. Garnett looked around puzzledly. Then his eyebrows shot up. “Yes,” he said, “Ginny Ames found a green cat, a fashion mutant, I suppose, wailing at the door early this morning. We don't have much food here, but she tried it on some elderberry preserves and apparently it liked it. I believe the creature's still around."

“Winnie, don't you get any bulletins from Security?” Opperly asked incredulously “Or from the FBL?"

Garnett shook his big head. “Not for the past ten years. Esp's so unpopular that even the government's forgot us."

“I see,” Opperly said, his eyes glittering with interest. “In that case you haven't read anything about a mutant creature described as a green cat, that's believed to have super-human parapsychological powers and to have caused officials to go over to Russia and do all sorts of other things described as crazy? The public hasn't been told, but all the higher echelons —scientists, doctors, psychiatrists—have been getting bulletins on the subject, demanding that they report anything they know or have heard about a green cat. Even I've been told a little."

“Can you beat it,” Garnett said disgustedly, “something involving esp and they consult everyone but us.” Then he turned to Opperly like a man waking up. “Do you mean to suggest that this creature is responsible for the esp results we've been getting?”

Opperly nodded. “I do.”

“But how, why?"

Opperly shrugged happily. “I don't know. I've merely been making some of those farfetched guesses I've warned my young journalist friends about.” And he smiled at Phil and da Silva.

“Guesses!” Garnett said. “Well, we'll soon find out.” And he started past them toward the front end of the hall, his big feet stirring dust from the ancient carpet. “We'll have a look at this animal and see what we think about it. Miss Ames—!” he started to call, and then suddenly his face went half out of this world again and he stopped in midstride. “She thinks the same,” he said softly and so astonishedly that even Phil knew he must be esping. “She agrees with you, Op.” The big face seemed to go a little further out of the world. “In fact, they all do. Practically everybody at the Foundation.” The big face seemed to go out almost all the way, while the voice sank to a faint murmur. “In fact, you're right."

The door opened at the front end of the hall and a long nosed young lady in a lab smock stepped out and nodded gently at Garnett. Her brow smoothed and her eyes half closed, as if she were esping something to him, then she seemed to notice that there were visitors around. “Would you care to see this green animal with your outer eyes?” she asked.

“We sure would, Ginny,” Garnett told her and started forward again. Phil wanted to burst out with all his information about Lucky, but da Silva forestalled him.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “Think you understand better I supposed. Sorry underrate you. Best to tell you now—"

At that moment Lucky ambled out of the door from which Ginny had emerged. He strode lazily, like a self-confident green god. The long nosed girl closed the door behind him. Phil felt his spirits splurge suddenly, happily, familiarly.

Akeley squeezed Phil's upper arm. “It is *he*!"

And almost at the same moment, a voice commanded from behind them, “Break to either side, everybody."

Phil obeyed the command and so did all the others.

Dave Greeley was standing at the head of the stairs. The representative of the FBL was looking both knowledgeable and competent, though even more gray haired and anxious than last night.

He nodded quickly at Opperly, said, “Pardon me, doctor,” then leveled his stun-gun between the ranks of men crowding the wail and punched the trigger. But his nerves couldn't have been as good as Phil thought they were, for instead of the green cat collapsing, Miss Ames pitched over on her face, gasping wonderingly, “My leg—I can't feel it!"

Greeley grimaced and re-directed his stun-gun, as the dust mushroomed up from the carpet around Miss Ames. But at the same moment Phil felt the golden wave billowing out from Lucky. Greeley's face turned red and his fingers stiffly uncurled from the gun, as if invisible hands were prying them away, and it dropped to the floor.

At that moment another voice behind them, languorous and scornful, said, “Stay where you are, gentlemen. It would be dangerous to move your hands."

Dora Pannes stood at the head of the stairs. The violet blonde was simply dressed in a gray frock, while a large handbag swung carelessly from her shoulder, but she looked rather more beautiful than last night. In her slender hand was a great big ortho.

Phil didn't feet at all frightened, although a vague memory nagged momentarily at his mind. He knew she couldn't hurt anyone while Lucky was there. He was more interested in the reactions of the others.

But with one exception there weren't any reactions.

The exception was da Silva. He was staring at Dora Pannes with a hungry adoration.

Meanwhile the violet blonde was walking forward in a most business-like way. She didn't even glance at da Silva. As she passed Greeley, her free hand snatched sidewise like a lizard's tongue for the stun-gun, snatched again at a larger one inside his coat, dropped them both in her handbag, and kept going straight for the cat.

Now she'll begin to feel it, Phil told himself.

But she kept straight on. Lucky seemed to be studying her casually. Abruptly he sprang back onto the window sill, his green fur rose, his muzzle lengthened, and from it came a prolonged, spitting hiss.

The next moment Phil felt such a formless terror as he had never known before, as if all reality were about to be crunched in a single fist, as if the blackness between the stars were lashing down to strangle him. Dimly across the hall, he saw the waves of white wash along the ranked faces. He gazed fearfully at Lucky, as if the green cat had turned into a devil, and saw Dora Pannes coolly stooping to grab him. The cat started to streak past her, but Dora's hands were faster. Then the cat sprang straight at her face, claws raking, but Dora calmly detached him and shoved him in her handbag and shut it and started back. She looked quite as beautiful and composed as she had at the stair head. The blood hadn't started to flow from the scratches in her face.

As she passed da Silva, he looked up at her groggily. In his expression there was still the ghost of desire.

“You jerk,” she said to him and walked on and went down the stairs.

Phil felt his heart hammering ten, eleven, twelve times, like a clock striking, and then he was racing downstairs and someone was pounding along after him.

He caromed off the open front door and stumbled down the steps in time to see a dark car roar off. Greeley was beside him now, barking orders into a pocket radio. From the other end of the street, another car shot in. Red plumes shot forward from under its hood as it rocket-braked to a heaving stop. Greeley piled into the back seat. Phil scrambled in after him.

“You can still see them,” Greeley yelled at the driver. “Take all chances. Rockets!” Then he turned to Phil.

“Who are you?"

“Phil Gish of the U.S. Newsmoon,” Phil replied recklessly, but the last word was lost in the rocket's roar.

The other car had been about five blocks away when they had taken off. As Phil untwisted himself with difficulty from the huddle into which acceleration had thrown him, he saw that its lead had been reduced to almost one block.

"Douse the jets," Greeley ordered. "We can curb them on our regulars; but watch out they don't shift. They may have rockets. Where do you stand in Project Kitty, Gish?"

"Sort of special observer," Phil improvised gaspingly, still hanging on with both hands. "My section has decided the green cat may not be dangerous."

"What?" Greeley demanded, peering ahead.

"Didn't you feel it up there?" Phil asked.

"Feel what?" Greeley said, his eyes measuring the lessening distance between the two cars. "You mean the horror?"

"No," Phil said. "Peace. Understanding—"

But just then the car ahead of them slowed a bit and something green flashed out of it, roiled over half a dozen times, and darted toward an alley.

"Brakes!" Greeley yelled and Phil almost tumbled into the lap of the man beside the driver as the forward rockets jetted and the back of the car lifted and slammed down. Then he realized he was the only one left in the car and scrambled out.

"The alley's blind; there's no way for it to get out," Greeley was calling. "Advance abreast. Gish, back us up!"

"Don't hurt him," Phil warned.

"We know enough for that!" Greeley yelled back.

By this time Phil was behind them, and saw the green cat crouching defiantly in the narrow alley's blind end, some twenty feet away from the advancing men.

The distance lessened to ten, and then the green cat darted forward, dodged this way, that, and dove between Greeley and the man on his right, straight into Phil's outstretched hands.

"Lucky!" Phil said blissfully, lifting the cat closer.

Five claws raked his chin painfully, while fifteen others dug into his hands.

He looked at the little face. Except for its color, it was a most ordinary, though spittingly furious cat face. In fact, it was a most ordinary cat.

And he could smell the dye.

“Here,” he said calmly and handed the animal to Greeley.

“Lucky?” Greeley yelled as the claws sank into his hands. “It's a dye-job, or I'll eat it! They had it all ready and threw it out to misdirect us. Come on! Here, take it, Simms, we've got to keep it to be on the safe side."

And presumably a third man's hands got clawed as they sprinted to the car.

But Phil was not with them. He hadn't the heart. As the rockets roared again, he simply stood halfway down the alley, scratched and weary.

XVI

As the elevator door closed behind Phil and he started the weary climb from twenty-eight to twenty-nine, he was already tormenting himself for having turned down Phoebe Filmer's invitation to have a drink in her room. When she had accosted him in the lobby, babbling about how he had rescued her at the Tan Jet, he had felt the last thing he wanted to be with was a human being. But now, with nothing separating him from the loneliness of his room but an echoing flight of stairs and an empty corridor, he suddenly realized that he needed human companionship above everything.

He remembered how boldly he had set forth just yesterday afternoon from his room to look at life and plunge into any adventure that came along. And as it happened he had seen so shockingly much of life and been buffeted by such vast oceans of adventure, that his brain still buzzed from it. At times during those incredible twenty-four hours, it had seemed to him that his whole character was changing, that he was becoming the daring yet sympathetic adventurer and lover he had always dreamed of being.

Yet here he was, dragging himself miserably back to his room, having just pulled his usual craven trick of saying “No,” when he desperately wanted, at least ten seconds later, to say “Yes.” Why, from the speed with which he was falling back into his old habit patterns, he'd probably spend the evening spying on Miss Filmer from his darkened window.

Oh, he could tell himself there was no reason to give a second thought to an ordinary pretty woman when he'd just met such a wickedly desirable girl as Mitzie Romadka and seen such a beauty as Dora Pannes, not to mention sharing the society of such grotesque but attractive characters as Juno Jones and Mary Akeley. But that was just rationalization and he knew it. Phoebe Filmer was more his size, and he wasn't even big enough for her.

Or he could once more tell himself that if only Lucky were at his side, he would be brave and bold again. But even that was no longer quite true. Fact was, that everything had become much too big for him. He wanted the green cat yes, but he wanted him as his own special pet, his mascot, his good luck cat, something to sleep at the foot of the bed—not as a mysterious mutant monster that kept getting him involved with male and female wrestlers, religious crackpots, gun-toting psychoanalysts, girls with

claws, hep-thugs, world-famous scientists, espers, vice syndicates, FBL raids, national and international crimes, and a whole lot of other things that were much, much too big for Phil Gish.

He coded open his door, stepped inside, and had almost closed it behind him when he realized that he was not returning to loneliness.

On her hands and knees, apparently to look under his bed, but now with her face turned sharply towards him, was the black haired, faun-like girl whose window was opposite his. He froze in every muscle, his hand locked to the barely ajar door, ready to jerk it open and run.

She got up slowly, with a smile. “'Allo,” she greeted in a warm voice with a foreign accent he couldn't place. “I have lost something and I think maybe he hide in here.” She smoothed out the black pied gray suit he'd watched her take off last night. Then she leisurely ran her hand back across her head and down the pony tail in which her hairdo ended.

“Something?” Phil croaked gallantly, his hand still glued fast behind him. He couldn't help it, but every time he looked her in the eye his gaze had to travel fearfully down her figure to her 10-inch platform shoes.

“Yes,” she confirmed, “a—how you call him?—pussycat.” Then, after a bit, “Say, you act like you know me.” Her smile widened and she shook a finger at him.

“'Ave you been peek at me, you naughty boy?"

Phil gulped and said nothing, yet that remark did a great deal to humanize her for him. Hallucinations don't make one blush.

“Thas all right,” she reassured him. “Windows across, why not? Same thing—windows across and both open a little—make me think maybe my pussycat jump over here. So I step across to see."

“Step across?” Phil demanded a bit hysterically, his gaze once more shooting to her legs.

“Sure,” she said smilingly and indicated the window. “Take a look."

With considerable reluctance, Phil unstuck his hand from the door and gingerly walked to the open window. Spanning the ten feet between it and the one opposite, was a flimsy looking telescope ladder of some gray metal.

Phil turned around, “Is it a green cat?” he asked reluctantly.

Her face brightened. “So he did jump across."

Phil nodded. “What's more,” he went on rapidly, “I think I met your brother today, a journalist named Dion da Silva, representing the newspaper

La Prensa."

She nodded eagerly at the first proper name. “Thas right,” she said. “I am Dytie da Silva."

“And I am Phil Gish. Did you say Dytie?"

“Sure. Short for Aphrodite, goddess of love. You like? Please, where my brother and pussycat now?"

“I haven't the faintest idea,” Phil said sadly.

She shrugged as if she expected to hear just that. “Is nothing new. We are crazy people, always get lost each other."

“Then you do come from Argentina?” Phil asked doubtfully. Her accent didn't sound Spanish, but his acquaintance with Spanish accents was limited.

“Sure,” she confirmed carelessly, her thoughts apparently elsewhere. “Far, far country."

“Tell me, Miss da Silva,” he went on, “does your cat have peculiar powers over people?"

She frowned at him. “Peculiar powers?” she repeated slowly as if testing each syllable. “Don understand."

“I mean,” Phil explained patiently, “can he make people happy around him?"

The frown smoothed. “Sure. Nice little pussycat, make people happy. You like animals, Phil?"

Once again he couldn't keep his gaze from flickering to her legs, but on the whole he was feeling remarkably bucked up.

“Miss da Silva,” he said, “I've got a lot more questions to ask you, but unfortunately I don't know Spanish and I don't think you understand English well enough to answer the questions if I put them to you cold. But maybe if I tell you just what's been happening to me, you'll be able to; at least, I hope so. Sit down Miss da Silva; it's a long, long story."

“Is very good idea,” she agreed, sinking down on the bed. “But please call Dytie, Phil."

She makes one feel at ease, Phil thought as he placed himself in the foam chair opposite. “Well, Dytie, it began...” and for the next hour he told her in some detail the story of what had happened to him ever since he had awakened to see Lucky sitting on the window sill. He suppressed entirely, however, the incident of watching her last night, which made it necessary

for him also to condense the account of his session with Dr. Romadka. Dytie frequently interrupted him to ask for explanations, some of them exceedingly obvious things, such as what was a hatpin, and what was the Federal Bureau of Loyalty and what was it that male and female wrestlers tried to do to each other in the ring? On the other hand, she sometimes passed up things he expected to puzzle her, though he couldn't always tell whether this was because she really understood them, or because she didn't want to. Orthos interested her not at all, stun-guns, mightily. Lucky's exploits did not seem to startle her much. Her usual comment was along these lines: “That pussycat. Is so stupid. But lucky too. Thas good name you give him, Phil."

When he came to the Humberford Foundation and Dytie's brother, she rolled over on her stomach and listened with closer attention. But when he hesitantly mentioned how Dion had seemed to develop such an instant yen for Dora Pannes, she whooped knowingly. “That brother,” she chortled. “He chase anything with two legs and milk glands. ‘Cept of course when he pregnant."

“What!"

“Say something? Must got wrong word,” Dytie interposed quickly, brushing the matter aside.

But she was very much interested in Morton Opperly and insisted on Phil telling her a great deal about the famous scientist.

“He smart man,” she said with conviction. “Very much like meet."

“I'll try to manage it sometime,” Phil said and told how the green cat had been captured by Dora Pannes.

Dytie shook her head solemnly. “Some people got very hard hearts,” she said. “Don like pussycat all."

Phil quickly rounded off his story with an account of how the fake green cat in the alley had scratched him.

Dytie got up and came over and touched his hands tenderly. “Poor Phil,” she said, then summarized: “So we know who have pussycat, but not where?"

“That's right,” Phil said quickly, “and that where is a tough one, because Billig's hiding from the FBL.” And he got up rapidly, trying not to make it obvious that he wanted to put a few feet between them. Dytie's fingers were soft and gentle enough, but there was something about her touch and her

close presence that set him shivering. Conceivably, it was her odor, which wasn't strong or even unpleasant, just completely unfamiliar. She looked after him rather wistfully, but did not try to follow. He faced her across the room.

“Well, that's my story, Dytie,” he said a bit breathlessly. “And now I want to ask my questions. Just what kind of a cat have you got, that Fun Incorporated could hope to bribe the federal government with it? Is it a mutant with telepathic powers and able to control emotions? Is it a throwback, or maybe deliberately bred back to an otherwise extinct animal? Is it some cockeyed triumph of Soviet genetics, working along lines our scientists don't accept? Damn it, is it even some sort of Egyptian god, like Sacheverell thinks? It's your turn to talk, Dytie."

But instead of answering him, she merely smiled and said, “'Scuse me, Phil, but that long story yours really long. Be right back."

He expected her to walk out the window and wondered what he'd do. But she merely went into the bathroom and shut the door.

He paced around, unbearably keyed up, lifting small objects and putting them down again. Nervously he turned on the radio, sight and sound, though he didn't look at it and didn't understand a word of what the inane sports gossipist was loudly yapping about the feats, follies and frivolities of the muscle stars. Then on his next circuit of the room, he happened to tread hard as he passed the radio, and something went wrong with it, so that the sound sank to a very low mumble and he was once more alone in his agitation.

So much so that he jumped when he heard a small noise behind him.

The hall door had opened. Mitzie Romadka was standing just outside, looking both adolescent and weary in faded blue sweater and slacks. A lock of her long, dark hair trailed in front of her ear. She fixed on Phil an unhappy, defiant stare.

“Last night I said ‘Goodbye forever’ and I meant it,” she began abruptly. “So don't get any ideas. I've come here to warn you about something.” Her voice broke a little. “Oh, it's all such an awful mess.” She bit her lip and recovered herself. “It isn't just that Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck hate me, or that you tried to make me get mushy and humble. When I came home by the service chute early this morning, I overheard my father talking with two other men. I listened and found out that he's a Soviet agent and that his job

now is to get the green cat no matter how much killing it takes. And he thinks you have it."

Phil looked at her and the hours between were gone and he was back in the little tangled square at dawn and Mitzie was about to leave him, and all his snapping nervous tension flowed in a new and steadier channel.

"Darling," he said softly and carefully, as if a sudden noise might make her vanish, "Mitzie darling, I wasn't trying to humble you."

"Oh?" she said, tucking the lock of hair back of her ear.

He moved toward her very slowly. "Actually I was just being conceited and I was jealous—both of you and your boy friends."

"Be very careful what you say, Phil," she whispered fearfully. "Be very honest."

"All right then," he said, "I was trying to humble you; I was doing my best to. I was full of the sort of vanity and condescension that comes from understanding too much. I didn't know that your kind of defiance and glory has a place in the world. Mitzie, I love you."

He put his arms around her and she didn't vanish. The feeling of her body against his wasn't like anything he'd imagined. It was simply slim and quite trusting and terribly tired.

Then her chin lifted from his shoulder and he was shoved back about six feet.

Mitzie was glaring at and beyond him. He was relieved that she didn't seem to have a gun, or knife, or claws, or anything like that.

He looked around. Dytie da Silva, leaning against the bathroom door, was watching them quizzically. "'Allo,' she greeted them cheerfully, then asked Phil, "Girl friend?"

Mitzie turned pale. "How many do you try to take on at once?" she spat at Phil.

"Don worry," Dytie advised relaxedly. "He very timid at first."

"Oh!" Mitzie exclaimed loudly, and stamped on the floor with both feet at once.

The radio came on loud again. "...long been known that she and her husband weren't on sleeping terms. But ironically her fans had to wait until what, with the outlawing of male-female wrestling, was probably her last professional appearance, before getting a glimpse of her new boy friend."

In the middle of the bright screen was Phil, with a dazed look and a silly smile on his face. Juno's arm was clutched around him and she was shouting "...even I gotta have a love life! And don't you be insulting it!"

"Oh!" Mitzie shouted, crashed the palm of her hand against Phil's left cheek, ran out the door and slammed it behind her. Phil stood there a few seconds. Then he turned off the radio and wiped the tears out of his left eye.

"Why you no chase?" Dytie inquired pleasantly. "Don worry, Phil, she come back. She really love you all more. She proud you such virile man, have many girls."

"Please," Phil groaned, lifting his hand. "That was goodbye forever."

"Forever is never. She come back," Dytie said.

And just then there was a timid knock at the door. Phil opened it, wondering whether he should slap Mitzie right away or wait. Dr. Anton Romadka pointed significantly at Phil's neck with a stun-gun and walked in.

The small psychoanalyst looked nattily professional in the old-fashioned business suit, white shirt and necktie affected by some doctors. There was even a vest buttoned over his little paunch. His left cheek was as smooth as his gleaming bald head; evidently he'd covered the scratches with skin film. His expression radiated fatherly good will and reasonableness, though he kept the stun-gun pointed straight at Phil and every now and then his gaze flickered to Dytie.

"Phil," he began, "I shall not deny the statement my daughter just made about me, for if you will only consider carefully, it will make us allies and comrades. Who could know as well as you, Phil, how hideously psychotic American civilization has become? You've personally experienced what it can do to the brain, the body, the sense organs. And who could appreciate as well as you, Phil, the sanity of the Workers' Republics, where under the first firm rule of Marxist fact and absolute science, all psychosis is impossible—because all irrationalisms, all illusion (including the mad vaporings of a gangrened capitalism and its pseudo-science) are inconceivable."

Phil found himself goggling his eyes and vaguely nodding. He shook himself. Romadka's cheery voice was remarkably hypnotic.

"Of course, I should have realized all this last night, Phil, and appealed to your reason," said Romadka as he kept the stun-gun trained on Phil's neck with geometric precision. "But I was hurried and emotionally upset—even our agents are not wholly immune to the American infection when living

with it—and I made several mistakes. Among other things I did not take my unfortunate daughter into account early enough, though I am certainly glad she came to warn you, since it enabled me to locate you. Which in turn will enable you, Phil, and your charming companion, to enjoy the bracing sanity of the Soviets."

The small psychiatrist smiled and carefully propped himself on the arm of the foam chair. His voice became genially confidential. “And now, children,” he said, for the first time including Dytie in his nod, “I am going to tell you how you can do a great service to the illusion-immune state and win an undying welcome when you reach its realistic shores. Psychotic capitalism, faced by total defeat in the next war, has loosed against the Workers’ Republics a final filthy weapon: its own collective madnesses and herd delusions, catalyzed by subtle and electronic and chemical bombardments of the collective Soviet nerve tissue. To date this capitalist poison in the Soviet Pan-Union has largely taken the form of delusions involving green cats. Don't mistake me, these green cats are undoubtedly real. It is my firm belief that they are ordinary cats with tiny electronic senders surgeried into their bodies, and with hormone spraying capacities comparable in their vileness to those of skunks. Although the green cats are possibly not the most important element in the assault on the Soviet psyche, they are the main stage props in that assault. Unfortunately, we have not been able to lay our hands on one of these creatures, in order to confirm our deductions and shape proper counter measures. It is absolutely essential that we do so."

“But there's only one green cat,” Phil objected, genuinely puzzled, “and it's supposed to be attacking America. It isn't, of course."

“I'll say it isn't. My boy, I am giving you the Marxist facts,” Romadka assured him gravely. “Those stories you have heard are merely blinds put out by the capitalist government to conceal from its own work slaves and pseudo scientists the enormity of its actions. What has happened is that a green cat has escaped from a government laboratory here. You led me to that cat once, Phil. You can do it again."

“I can't,” Phil said mildly.

“Phil, you can,” Romadka assured him.

“But you got him once,” Phil objected, “and all you did was let him go again."

For the first time a shadow of impatience darkened Romadka's geniality. “I told you I made some mistakes last night. I let someone get a hypo-beam on me, probably a drug spray too. For a time I wasn't responsible for my actions. It was all I could do to escape the FBL raid. But it won't happen again.” His voice grew brisk. “So come on along with me, Phil, and bring your friend. There's no more time for discussion."

“But—” Phil began.

Dytie da Silva stepped into the foreground. “Me no go,” she told Romadka. “Why should I? You sound crazy head. ‘Lusion-'mune state? ‘Rationalisms impossible? Abs'lute science? All nonsense!"

The psychoanalyst lifted his eyebrows at her accent and sentiments. “I was just about to take up your case, young lady. Why are you here in the first place?"

“Just come from room across,” Dytie told him, jerking a thumb at the window.

Romadka studied her through narrowed eyes behind which memory seemed to be at work. Suddenly he smiled thinly. “The description tallies,” he said. “You're the young woman Mr. Gish watched undressing last night, and onto whom he grafted a remarkable delusion."

“Phil, you never tell me about that,” Dytie said, looking at him brightly.

“Naturally he wouldn't,” Romadka said, a bit primly.

“Why not?” Dytie demanded. “I don care. If he like, okay."

Romadka looked at her contemptuously. “A common exhibitionist, I see. Nymphomania too."

Dytie planted her hands on her hips. “Look, I no say long words good. But your diagnose wrong there. Not nym'omania—satyr'asis. I show you.” And then and there she started to peel off a stocking. Phil watched in fascinated horror.

Romadka stood up angrily. “Of all the—” he began. “If you think that some crude appeal to my sexual urges—"

But at that moment Dytie pulled off her shoe and foot, and held out her dainty black hoof, fur-tufted fetlock and slim pastern for his inspection. “Okay, ‘lusion-'mune,” she said grimly. “Take good look. Satyr'asis!"

Dr. Romadka's knees shook. His face was gray. His eyes bulged.

Without warning, Dytie stooped, spun around, and let go with a very accurate kick. The stun-gun shot out of Romadka's trembling hand and

clattered against the wall beyond. Romadka snatched his hand away as if the hoof were hell, and stumbled frantically out of the room. The sound of his rapid, uneven footsteps slowly faded out. Phil knew just how he felt. It was all he could do not to follow him.

Dytie began to laugh uproariously. While doing so, she hobbled over to the door, shut it and then picked up Romadka's gun.

“This stun-gun?” she asked Phil.

Phil wet his lips and clutched at the table for support. He knew he must be quite as pale as Romadka. “Dytie,” he finally managed to say, his teeth chattering, “you come from a country a lot farther away than Argentina."

She smiled apologetically. “Thas right, Phil. I got longer story yours tell."

Phil nodded shakily. “But first, if you please...” he faltered, and pointed at the shoe, foot and crumpled stocking she'd dropped on the floor.

“Sure, Phil. I un'erstand.” She picked them up and sat down on the edge of the bed to put them on. Phil followed her movements unwillingly, but when it came to the point where she was about to thrust her hoof into the deep well in the false foot and the platform he flinched and looked away.

Meanwhile she was saying matter-of-factly, “You no tell ‘lusion-'mune man, but you got idea where pussycat is?"

“No,” he replied nervously, “but I know where I might be able to find out."

“Is in this city?"

“Yes."

“You take me there, Phil?"

“I guess so."

“Don you want find pussycat too, Phil?"

“Yes, I think I do."

“Okay, thas fine. You can look now."

He forced himself to steal a glance at her, then let out a sigh of relief. Her two legs were once more just like any other girl's. Illusion, he decided, was at times the Bread of Life.

“And now,” he said, “you can answer those questions of mine."

But just then there was more rapping at the door.

“This time girl friend,” Dytie told him optimistically.

But Phil was taking no more chances. He switched on the one-way peephole first, and looked straight into the face of Dave Greeley.

When Phil whispered “Federal Bureau of Loyalty,” to Dytie, she jumped up. During his long narrative she had asked him several questions about that organization, he had answered them in detail, and she had apparently formed some very definite conclusions. “We got beat it, Phil. No time question-answer now.” And she lightly sprang to the window sill and walked across the ladder.

It wasn't as long as the beam at the Akeleys', but it was ten times as high and Phil wasn't drunk. If he hadn't crossed the beam at the Akeley's and gone down the service chute at the Romadkas', he would never have dared it. His heart was hammering as he let himself down into Dytie's room. He turned around with some vague idea of removing the ladder. He heard a crash in his room. Dytie grabbed him.

“No time now,” she said. And she urged him out of her room into the corridor.

Seconds later they were entering the elevator on her side of the building. “Hey, that's the up button,” he warned as she punched it.

“I know, Phil,” she said reassuringly.

Emerging on the roof, Phil felt for a moment a big sense of freedom. The sodium mirror had not quite set, and everything around was bright although the lower part of the sky was dark and many stars showed in it.

Then he saw the half dozen copters swinging in low toward them like june bugs.

Dytie was hustling him along, but only toward an empty corner of the roof. He resented her pointless display of energy. A mighty voice from the sky commanded them to stop.

Dytie halted almost at the edge of the roof, felt around in the air, climbed a couple of feet up into it and felt around again.

There was the sound of a copter scraping, bouncing and grounding behind them

Dytie opened in the air a small doorway that was black as ink, and climbed inside. She turned around, her face a pale mask in an inky rectangle, urged, “Come on, Phil,” and stretched a white arm out of the rectangle down toward him.

Phil stared at this weird air-framed portrait. Beneath it he could clearly see the sheer walls of the building opposite and the dizzying ribbon of street fifty floors below.

Behind him men shouted and there was another shattering command from the sky.

Phil grabbed Dytie's wrist. His other hand, fumbling blindly, found an invisible rung in the air. So did his foot. He scrambled up the air and pitched over the sill of the inky doorway, into an inky sack and found a curving floor under him. Rolling over, he saw behind him a rectangle of the sky with three stars in it. The rectangle narrowed and vanished, and there was no light at all.

Then he started to fall.

XVII

PHIL struck out wildly, with the instinctive hope that a man falling to his death could warp space to his advantage if he tensed his muscles sufficiently.

Then he wondered how long it would take a man to fall fifty floors, but the mathematics were beyond anything he could do quickly enough in his head.

Then he asked himself why the inky sack was falling with him.

Then he retched, but brought up only the ghosts of a yeast-spread sandwich and a glass of soybean milk consumed a day ago.

He continued to fall.

Soft light sprang up around him. He was inside a sphere some eight feet in diameter and his feet were near the center, while his cheek gently brushed the sphere's soft lining. Swiveling his gaze past his feet, he noticed Dytie da Silva sprawled negligently in the air and intently studying a screen set in the lining of the sphere.

But he was still falling.

Phil knew little enough about space ships, but he knew they couldn't safely go into free-fall without accelerating first to get some kind of edge on earth's gravitational field.

But there had been no acceleration.

“Dytie!” he yelled, and in the confined space the noise was deafening. “What's happening to me?"

Wincing a bit, she looked around at him. ‘Shh, Phil. You in free-fall but not falling. I turn off grav'ty."

Still retching, Phil tried to comprehend that idea. “Turn off gravity?” He was still falling, but no longer so sure he was going to hit anything.

Dytie looked along his helplessly sprawled body at his face. “Sure, Phil. Grav'ty go round this little boat just like light do. Grav'ty no pull it, light no show it."

“That's why it was invisible?"

“Vis'ble? Nobody see it. Wait bit, Phil, got do things."

“But in a ship like this you could travel—” Phil began, his mind suddenly full of dizzying speculations.

“This not ship, Phil, just dinghy. No talk now."

Phil's falling acquired a direction. He found himself drifting gently toward Dytie. “Here ‘side me, Phil,” she instructed. A few moments later he was comfortably stretched out on his stomach beside Dytie, his head poised like hers above the screen.

And then the speed of his new directed fall increased, although the sphere was no longer falling with him, until his body was comfortably pressed against the soft lining. He deduced after a while that they must be accelerating, although he got his chief clue from the screen.

At first he couldn't interpret the picture on the screen. It was in shades of violet and showed a few large squares and oblongs with dark ribbons between most of them. On the central square were a number of dots, which slowly moved as he watched them—also three or four crosses with blobs at their centers. Gradually the squares and rectangles shrank, while more of the same came onto the screen from the edges. He realized that he was looking down at the city and that the dots, which he could hardly distinguish any more, were the men hunting them, while the crosses were the copters.

For a bit his stomach chilled at the thought of being poised so high above the city and going higher. But then he began to lose himself in the wonder of the picture. Phil hadn't traveled a great deal by air and had seen even less when he'd done so, and the growing picture of the city was enthralling. He began to feel rather like a god and to speculate how he'd mete out justice to mankind if he owned this mysterious little dinghy. Visions of sudden descents on dictators danced in his head.

“We soon high ‘nough, Phil,” she said. “Hold on hands, stick feet under bar."

He obeyed her instructions, taking hold of two handles and thrusting his legs under a large padded bar. A moment later he knew the reason, for he began to be pulled away from the screen and had to hold on tight. He deduced that they were decelerating. After a bit this stopped too and he was once more “in free-fall but not falling.” Meanwhile, the picture in the screen had become one of the whole city—a checkerboard of tiny squares not unlike a map.

Dytie produced and unfolded an ordinary street map and flattened it out beside the screen.

“You say you know where find out pussycat is. You say in city. Show Dytie."

Phil forced his mind to tackle this problem. His first realization was just how flimsy the hope was on which he'd based his statement to Dytie that he might be able to locate the green cat. It depended on Billig having the green cat, on Jack Jones knowing where Billig had hidden from the FBL, and on Jack being in hiding himself at the Akeleys'. Still, it was the only way he knew of getting a line on Lucky.

And then it occurred to him that he didn't know where the Akeley house was located. But a sudden memory of a huge show window full of marching mannequins came to his rescue. The Akeley house was next to Monstro Multi-Products, and everybody knew the address of that vast department store. He located it for Dytie on the street map and then on the screen. Soon they were accelerating downward, so that he had to cling to the handles again, while the squares on the screen were growing larger, with the large square that was Monstro Multi-Products moving toward the center.

He started to ask Dytie to answer the questions he'd put to her in his room, but she cut him off with, “Like say, very long story. No time now. First find pussycat. Very ‘portant."

The rectangle representing the roof of Monstro Multi-Products now filled quite a bit of the screen, and the streets beside it were broad ribbons. Their descent slowed. Dytie maneuvered the dinghy around the department store until Phil spotted, at the base of the building next to it, the tiny slot indicating the cubical pocket of space in which the Akeley house stood, robbed of its air rights.

As they dropped slowly into the canyon of the street past windowed and windowless walls, Phil felt a witchery in the violet version of the city. He could make out beetles and tinier bugs—cars and people.

Soon they were hovering only ten feet above the violet sidewalk and the unsuspecting pedestrians.

Then Dytie slipped the dinghy between the rail of the sidewalk and the “floor” of the tall building over the Akeley house. The violet picture grew quite dark. They descended a little farther, past the top-level street and the one next below it until they were a couple of feet above the pile of bricks from the fallen chimney. Dytie moved some controls. The screen went

blank, the lights went out, and with breath-taking suddenness Phil's body crunched into the soft lining as normal weight returned.

“Got legs down for dinghy to stand on,” Dytie told him. “Quiet now, Phil."

A slit of lesser darkness appeared beyond Dytie and widened to a rectangle through which, after a bit, he could make out a section of the Akeley porch. Then the rectangle was obstructed as Dytie climbed out through it. Phil followed her, feet first, moving them around until they found the rungs, and carefully climbed down until he could step off onto the Akeleys’ gritty front yard. Then he looked up. As far as he could see there was absolutely nothing above him except the two upper-level streets and the dull black “ceiling” above the house. Not only did light “go around” the dinghy, but it did so without getting shuffled.

“All safe,” Dytie assured him. “Nobody climb over rocks, bump in ladder legs. This place, Phil?"

The Akeley house looked more ancient and dangerously dilapidated than ever, canted forward at least a foot after the chimney's collapse. A gaping wound had been left in the two upper stories and nothing had been done to bandage it. However, a little light glowed through the shutters of the living-room windows.

Stepping gingerly, with an eye cocked on the ominously slanting wall, Phil led Dytie up onto the porch and around the corner of it. He hesitated for a moment in front of the old door with the tiny cat door cut in the bottom of it, then lifted his hand to the cat-headed knocker and banged it twice. After a while there were footsteps, the old style peephole was opened, and this time Phil immediately recognized the watery gray eye as Sacheverell's.

“Greetings, Phil,” the latter said. “Who's that with you?"

“A young lady named Dytie da Silva."

Sacheverell opened the door. “Come right in. Fate must be at work. Her brother's here."

XVIII

THE Akeley living room was as crazily cluttered as when Phil last saw it. No one had done much, if any, cleaning up after the fight. In addition, there were a large number of dirty plates, cups and glasses abandoned in odd places. Judging by the remnants of food and drink in them, three informal meals had been consumed since last night, not counting snacks.

The black velvet curtains at the far end of the room had been pulled aside, revealing the altar Sacheverell had prepared for Lucky in what had been the dining room a century ago. It consisted of a small table or box set against the far wall and covered with reddish-brown velvet that trailed to the floor in graceful folds. Fastened to the wall above it was an ancient ankh or crux ansata, the Egyptian cross with looped top, symbolizing procreation and life. On lower tables to either side were large unlit candles and statuettes of many of the Egyptian gods: queenly Isis, whip-wielding Osiris, jackal-jawed Anubis and cat-headed Bast herself.

And there was the same profusion of cats, though they were no longer peaceful as they'd been when Lucky was in the house. They stalked about with ears drawn back and fur fluffed fearsomely; they ambushed each other from behind and under furniture; they snarled and jumped whenever they met. Those wolfing the bits of food left on plates would lift their heads every few seconds to hiss warnings. The only one asleep was impiously curled on Lucky's altar.

The dark low table inlaid with a silver pentacle had been righted and placed in the center of the room. On it were glasses and a bottle of brandy. Beside it sat Juno Jones, still in her dowdy dress with the ripped sleeves hanging from her meaty arms, but with her flower covered hat once more jammed down over her cropped blonde hair. She looked sullen and on the defensive.

Across the table from her, leaning forward in their chairs, sat Dion da Silva and Morton Opperly. Both of them stood up as Sacheverell triumphantly swept Phil and Dytie into the room, saying “Our council of war—or perhaps I should say muscular peace—is complete!"

Opperly smiled courteously, seeming completely at home in these wild, wonderful and crummy surroundings; perhaps a mind hungry for any and

all facts liked a grubby bohemian atmosphere.

Dion da Silva on the other hand, as soon as he spotted Dytie, put down the big glass of whiskey he was holding and whooped out three or four words in a foreign language, then caught himself and changed to, “'Allo, darling! Great see. ‘Allo, ‘allo, ‘allo."

By this time he had Dytie in his arms and was hugging her with a hungriness that struck Phil as distinctly unbrotherly. She wasn't being any too sisterly about it herself. But finally she pushed him away with a gasp. “Thas ‘nough,” she told him. “Great see too, dumbhead. ‘Bout time turn up.'

Dion looked hurt for as long as it took him to get his glass of whiskey. “Know what doing?” he asked his sister excitedly.

“Yes, get drunk,” she told him and whispered to Phil, “Know what Dion short for? God wine. Pick good name, eh?"

“No get drunk,” Dion asserted with some dignity. Then his excitement got the better of him again and he burst out with, “We finding pussycat!"

There was a giggle that Phil recognized. Looking around, he saw Mary Akeley sitting in her alcove backed by her shelves of wax dolls and busy at work sewing clothes for another under a large magnifier. Sacheverell's witch-nosed young wife had shifted to an almost off the bosom evening dress and tied a huge green bow around her coarse dark hair.

“That man, he cuts me up in little pieces every time he says a word,” she gurgled, without pausing in her work. “He's so cute."

“Thanks sweetheart,” Dion replied, gayly waving his glass at her, “I cute all over. All full s'prises. Show sometime."

Dytie suppressed a guffaw and whispered to Phil, “'Member tell you: two legs, milk glands?” Phil nodded, though he judged that Dion's interest in Mary didn't nearly come up to his thirsty adoration of Dora Pannes. The satyr (Phil felt shocked at how glibly the word came into his mind) was just keeping his hand in.

Sacheverell ignored the flirtatious interchange. His sunburned features gleamed with controlled excitement. “The young lady is Dytie da Silva, Dion's sister,” he told Opperly and Juno. Then he turned to Phil. “I suppose you're wondering why Dr. Opperly and Señor da Silva are here. Well, I brought them along with me from the Foundation because both of them are

genuinely interested in *him,* and among the lot of us I think we have a very good chance of delivering *him* from his enemies."

"What he mean, him?" Dytie asked Phil. "He means pussycat?"

Phil nodded.

"I mean the Green One," Sacheverell confirmed a bit reprovingly. "I mean Bast Returned, the Bringer of Love and Concord."

Dytie didn't bother with that, but went on to whisper to Phil, "He say Op'ly. Op'ly nice slim man there good face? Meet us please."

Sacheverell was getting set for a speech and he gave Phil a faintly pained look when the latter performed the desired introduction. Dr. Opperly surprised Phil by gallantly kissing Dytie's hand and then not letting go of it. He didn't behave at all like a scientist of eighty-plus years should. And Dytie turned on a lot more charm than Phil recalled her using on him. As the two of them stood there murmuring happy but probably highly intelligent nothings to each other, Phil felt a jealous impulse to call out to Opperly, "Wait until you see her real legs," but he somehow suspected that Opperly wouldn't be shocked at Dytie's real legs or anything about her. He had noted a look of surprise come into Opperly's face as the latter took Dytie's hand, and from his own experience he'd known why, but Opperly's surprise had turned not to revulsion, but to eager interest.

Opperly's voice suddenly became sharp, clear and romantic: "I'd be delighted to, Miss da Silva."

Dytie turned to the others with a self-satisfied smile. "Op'ly me got much talk 'bout," she announced. "'Scuse please. Dion you take care pussycat business me."

And she and Dr. Opperly strolled out through the dining room arm in arm, beaming at each other and chatting happily.

Sacheverell looked after them a shade critically. "They don't seem to have any great regard for the importance of the situation, I must say, so we'll carry on by ourselves in making plans to rescue the Green One. Mr. Gish, what have you to contribute?"

In a few sentences Phil sketched how he'd found Lucky at Fun Incorporated, lost him again, then caught up with him at the Humberford Foundation just before Dora Pannes grabbed him.

As soon as Phil finished, Mary Akeley cut in. She was through sewing clothes and had begun to put them on a relatively bulky doll which Phil

recognized as the portrait of Moe Brimstine she'd started on last night. To his amazement, Phil noticed that she was even putting underwear on the doll and slipping almost microscopically tiny objects into its pants pockets with a tiny tweezer.

She said, “Did you happen to find out, Phil, why little old Dr. Romadka kidnapped those three cats of ours?"

Phil explained, as briefly and unsickeningly as he could, what had happened to them.

Mary reached over her shoulder and got the doll that was the image of Dr. Romadka. She fixed on it her witchiest stare.

“Slow, slow acid dripped on your forehead,” she incanted with a sincerity that sent gooseflesh coursing under Phil's shirt. “And I hope it's days before it gets in your eye. That's the first and mildest of your torments.” She picked up the doll she'd been dressing and informed it, “That goes for you, too. After the acid really gets in the first eye, we deviate to other parts of your body. To begin with..."

A sudden cat fight prevented Phil from finding out just how nasty Mary Akeley's imagination could get. Sacheverell separated the five squalling combatants with a few painless but strategic kicks. Then he hitched up his turquoise slacks and said, looking at his wife severely, “Now perhaps we can forget all hates and other dark vibrations and get down to business. Here's the situation, Mr. Gish. Earlier today, Juno overheard her husband Jackie tell Cookie where Billig and Mr. Brimstine are hiding..."

“Just Moe Brimstine,” Juno corrected dourly.

“Comes to the same thing,” Sacheverell went on. “Now Jackie and Cookie are safely asleep upstairs..."

“Yes,” Juno butted in again, “but they're not going to stay that way too much longer."

“Not after what you put in their whiskey?” Sacheverell asked her with a thin smile.

“Listen,” Juno told him, “those two guys have had more things in their whiskey than ever got wrote down in books jerks like you read. They're tough, the little punks."

“Well, if they do wake up, I'm sure you can take care of the two of them. So there's the situation, Mr. Gish, and the only trouble is that Mrs. Jones won't tell us where Mr. Brimstine is. She started to, but then she shut up like

an air lock. We've pleaded with her, we've implored her, we've promised her things. I've done my best to explain to her just how cosmically important it is that the Green One be served and worshipped properly so that he will be able to change the world. Señor da Silva flattered and jollied her, and Dr. Opperly was friendly as anything. But she just won't talk."

"I sure won't talk to nuts like you," the female wrestler told him wrathfully. "If you hadn't started acting so squirrely, I'd have probably spilled it straight off. But I'm not the sort of person who likes to be jollied or anything else—"

"'Scuse please," Dion interrupted. "No jolly, really mean. Much like you, Juno Jones. Big strong woman."

"And I don't enjoy nut talk," Juno said to Sacheverell, ignoring da Silva. "Every crazy reason you gave me for talking made me that much surer I wouldn't." She took a drink and turned toward Phil, her elbows on her correspondingly large knees. "Now, with you it's different," she said. "You got a nut's idea of food, but outside of that you're pretty human. And I gotta admit you're a gutsy little guy, because I saw you go up against Brimstine and from what I hear you did some more of the same later. But the main thing is that you own this crazy cat, or at least you was looking for it when I first met you. And I don't believe you had any nut ideas about it, though I thought so at the time. That right, Phil? Or are you planning to do something cosmic with that cat?"

"I just want to find it," Phil said honestly.

"That settles it for me. It's your cat and you got a right to know where it is, even if you get killed trying to get it and I get into all sorts of mucking trouble for telling you. You want I should tell you in private, Phil, or just say it right out in front of all these screwballs?"

"Thank you, Juno," Phil said quietly. "Just say it right out."

Juno opened her mouth—and then said, "Oh, Lord."

Phil turned around. Jack and Cookie were just coming in from the hall.

"Fine sort of wife you turned out to be," Jack informed Juno, striding toward her with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. "Can't leave you ten minutes but you start pulling some dumb trick." With circles under his eyes and a day's growth of beard, the black-sweatered little wrestler did a fair job of looking outraged and dejected. But Cookie, automatically imitating his

hero, could produce only an expression like that of a blonde baby about to cry.

“Getting sneaky, too,” Jack observed. “Spying on me."

“Underhanded,” Cookie commented.

“Underhanded?” Juno banged the silver inlaid table so hard that it jumped and she had to grab at her glass and the bottle. Why, you two stinkers are so permanently underhanded you couldn't play no game but softball."

“Also, I don't like the company you keep,” Jack continued. “The Ikeless Joe was bad enough,” he said, giving Phil the barest glance before going on to da Silva, “but where between here and Pluto did you ever pick up this silly greaser who can't even talk English?"

“This corny gigolo,” Cookie added witheringly.

Dion, who until this moment had seemed merely interested, put down his glass and frowned at Jack. “No like you,” he asserted. “You want kick in face, trample?"

Phil winced, visualizing it in the full, rich details.

“Do you know who you're talking to?” Cookie demanded of Dion.

“Don't brawl boys,” Mary called from the alcove, “at least until I've finished this ticklish part.” She was putting some finishing touches on Moe Brimstine's face under the magnifier. “Then I think I'd like to watch you tramp around, Dion man."

“Don't anybody worry,” Jack said sadly. “I'm not looking for a fight even if I was handed one. I'm too downhearted about this innocent, thoughtless, uneducated wife of mine."

“Uneducated?” she exploded. “After being married to you all these years? You got so many rotten ideas you're a whole university. Well, I've graduated. And shut up, now, ‘cause I got to tell Phil here where he can find Moe Brimstine and maybe Billig and his cat."

Jack whirled toward her. “Juno, you don't know what you're saying. You don't know what you'd be doing. Just come upstairs a minute and I'll explain the whole deal."

“Come upstairs?” Juno mocked. “Tell that to the green farm girls trying to break into the wrestling racket. Now look here, Phil. Brimstine..."

“Juno!” Jack yelled, “I didn't want to tell you in front of everybody, but there's a million dollars riding on this deal for me and you, if Billig pulls out of his trouble. Which he can do, so long as he has the green cat to trade

to the government. And look, Juno, Billig's lost all his bodyguards and power and everything—he's got to depend on Brimstine and me and Cookie."

Juno stared at him. For a second or two there was silence. Then Sacheverell coughed delicately.

"Jack," he said unhurriedly, "I am convinced that you have a deep appreciation of spiritual values. Your aura may flicker and dim, but in the end it always glows out bright and clear. Yesterday you gave up ten thousand dollars Moe Brimstine would have given you for the Green One, just in order that we might worship him properly and help him change the world. Now if you were willing to do that..."

"I know, I know," Jack snarled at him impatiently, "but this time it's really big money."

Sacheverell looked up at the ceiling, as if he were silently telling some god just how evil a world it was.

"I was flattered by you and Mary for a while," Jack went on. "I liked your style and I fell for some of your wild ideas. I played along with you to the tune of ten thousand dollars, though I won't say I wasn't going to steal the green cat back and sell it to Brimstine after you'd had your fun with it. But tuck your aura up over your ears and get this through your head: this time it's really big money."

Sacheverell said, "Mary, remind me to burn our black sweaters tomorrow morning."

From the look on Juno's face, Phil could tell that Jack had finally done something to please her.

But he had done it rather too late. The satisfaction washed out of Juno's face and only the grimness was left as she said to him, "That million was just for you, Jack, or for you and Cookie until half a minute ago. Another thing, Billig isn't going to pull out of this—and if he did he's the kind of man who kills the people who save him. But even if you got your million, I wouldn't take any part of it. Don't get the idea that anybody, including that crazy green cat, has made me go soft. It's just that I wouldn't ever accept anything from you, Jack—not ever again." Without a pause she turned to Phil and said, "Brimstine's behind the counter in the Bug-Eyed Bar in All Pleasures Amusement Park. I'll take you to the exact spot."

At that moment, when everyone was watching Juno, a cool, scornful voice spoke from the dining room: “And we'll be coming along."

Phil's head followed the others around. Standing in front of Lucky's altar, his bulging forehead wrinkled with unsmiling amusement, was Carstairs. To his left stood Llewellyn, eyes gleaming in his impassive black face. To Carstairs’ right lounged Buck, yawning but watchful. Phil got the feeling that the hep-thugs were trying to look like the muzzles of the weapons they held with casual proficiency. Close beside Buck and a little behind him stood Mitzie Romadka.

Carstairs said, “We've been finding out some things about this green cat ourselves.” He could talk very softly because there wasn't any noise in the room. “We think it would be a lot more desirable if we were the ones who sold the cat to Uncle Sammy. You people are going to help us get the cat. Incidentally, clown,” he addressed Phil, “your little girl friend here was responsible for our locating you people. Isn't that so, Mitz?"

But Mitzie said nothing. To Phil, she looked remarkably pale, tight-lipped and miserable for a girl enjoying a revenge.

“Yes,” Carstairs continued, “she came whimpering to us a little while ago, asking us to kidnap you or something silly like that. Can you imagine, clown, your girl friend was stupid enough to think we'd be pleased at her and even do something for her, after we'd kicked her out of the gang and she'd skunked on us to Billig? Youthful illusions die hard. Well, instead of that she did something for us. After a little persuasion she told us all she knows about the green cat and you people, also some addresses—including this one."

And now Phil saw that Mitzie was looking at him agitatedly and trying to speak, but couldn't get her mouth open. He realized her mouth must be taped shut with some transparent, non-reflecting material. Buck noticed and twisted her wrist while thoughtfully watching her face.

Carstairs concluded, “There's not much more to say. You and you and you"—and he stabbed a gun muzzle at Jack, Cookie and Sacheverell—"are staying here with my friend Llewellyn. Dear little Mitz will stay here too that's partly in case you get any funny ideas, clown. The rest of you are coming along with Buck and me on a thrill-packed trip to All Pleasures. According to what Mitz tells us, you all may have useful angles on catching this cat for us. Transportation's out in front."

Juno got up with a sullen shrug. Dion for once was very quiet. Phil found himself wondering whether or not Opperly and Dytie had avoided the hep-thugs.

Mary Akeley took the dolls depicting Moe Brimstine and Dr. Romadka, put them in a big handbag, caught up a bolero jacket, and calmly announced, “Well, I'm ready."

XIX

THIRD MILLENNIUM THRILLS!
1000 FEET OF FREE-FALL!
RECORDED KISSES AND HUGS!
Cuddle Your Favorite Star
Better Than Handies
YOUR MIND CLEARED IN TEN MINUTES!
Relive Your Childhood
You'll Feel Ripping as a Rocket!
TEST YOUR STRENGTH AGAINST A BEM!
KILL MARTIANS!
THROW ROCKS AT GLAMOR GIRLS!
FLUORESCENT TATTOOS!

THOSE were a few of the signs that flared and blared at Phil as he was marched across the springy, rubberized, plasti-bottle strewn grounds of All Pleasures Amusement Park.

The government crack-down on Fun Incorporated had produced a few tangible changes in Double AP, as far as Phil could judge from his last visit. The burlesque juke boxes were padlocked, the rubberoid figures that would shimmy orgiastically for a quarter were shrouded from view. Dresses were perhaps an inch higher than usual on the bosoms of the girls working in concessions. There didn't seem to be any shifty-eyed gents recruiting special parties to meet a gambling robot or enjoy some other form of illegal entertainment. In front of the side show someone was painting out the sign that read, “See the Woman With Four Mammary Glands!” Phil noticed Dion looking up at this defacement rather wistfully.

Yet there was an uneasiness in the park, and it wasn't just that the crowd was light. Barkers called out too suddenly and stopped too soon. Customers hesitated uncomfortable in front of concessions, then shuffled morosely on. Over-age glamor girls ready to dodge rubber rocks, or have their bedclothes or skirts jerked off when a spaceball hit its planet-simulating target, were a trifle hysterical in the challenges they shrilled at passing patrons. The cries coming faintly from the top of the 1,000 foot drop in the Spaceship Ride

weren't the usual terrified but delighted squeals; they sounded more like wails.

Perhaps the fall of Fun Incorporated had caused people who pathetically treasured their thrills, or the money to be made from them, to wonder, “What next?” Perhaps President Barnes's rambling apocalyptic speeches had finally taken effect, making people ask themselves what they were getting from the so-called pleasures of life, especially the more highly advertised ones. Perhaps the government directive just now being barked from the public news-speakers for the destruction of all cats had given people a “We'd be safer at home” feeling.

Or it may have been that the uneasiness at Double AP was part of a general feeling gripping America, a feeling that had been gathering power in the unconscious and just now burst into thought, a feeling that something that even the government couldn't handle was stalking invisibly, whether for good or ill, behind each man.

Of course, for Phil the menacing stalkers were two very definite figures: Carstairs and Buck, who at the moment were shepherding their unwilling assistants through the pupil of one of several surrealistic eyes that served as the entrances to the Bug-Eyed Bar.

Tonight the gaudy tavern was emptier than the Park outside. Its famous Ten-G Highballs and Stun-Gun Cocktails were going begging. Its notoriously drink-hungry hostesses were conspicuous by their absence. The only two customers were being served soda pop by the smaller of the two bartenders, making it very simple for Juno, Phil, Mary and Dion to climb onto pneumo-barstools in front of the other bartender. Carstairs and Buck stood close behind them.

Phil found it difficult to believe that the man in front of them was Moe Brimstine. For one thing, his hair was red, even to the stubble on his cheeks and chin. For another, the eyes that Moe had always kept behind dark glasses were as small and squinting as a pig's. And although the fugitive from the FBL must recognize several of them, he didn't show it in any way that Phil could discern. He looked them all over stolidly, polishing the speckless bar with the immemorial soiled towel. For that matter, the whole bar looked much as a bar might have looked fifty or a hundred years before; robots could not supervise B-girls, nor had they ever been legalized as bouncers.

“What's your pleasure?” the big red-head asked.

Phil felt Carstairs’ gun dig his ribs. He tried to wet his lips.

“Mrs. Brimstine, I want my green cat,” he croaked.

Moe Brimstine wrinkled his forehead. “That made with creme de menthe, chartreuse, or green fire?"

“I mean my live green cat,” Phil told him.

“We don't serve drunks here,” Brimstine said evenly. “Your friend's had one too many. What would you ladies and gentlemen care for?"

Mary Akeley opened her handbag and laid the Moe Brimstine doll on the counter before her. She looked at it thoughtfully for a moment and with deliberate finickiness took off its tiny dark glasses. Its eyes were piggy. She smiled. She replaced the glasses and fished out of her handbag a hatpin, a pair of scissors, a small knife, a little pair of pliers, a sample size flame-pack, a tiny iron with insulated handle, and a white crusted black bottle, and lined them up in a neat row.

“This isn't a powder room, lady,” Brimstine said. “Order your drinks."

Phil couldn't help but be impressed by the big man's composure, and then without warning he felt a gust of terror that he knew at once had nothing to do with guns behind him and could hardly stem from the childish paraphernalia for black magic Mary Akeley had set out.

He could tell that the gust had hit Moe Brimstine too, for the big man dropped the towel and backed up against the shelves of bottles behind him.

Mary Akeley said, “Mr. Brimstine, you stole the Green One, whom my husband adores as Bast. You are going to suffer until you return him.” Her voice shook a little at first, then settled down to a cold and cruel monotone. “I'm sorry I couldn't bring my little rack and iron maiden, but these implements are quite adequate.” She ignited the flame-pack and held the tiny iron over it.

Phil heard Juno draw in her breath and Carstairs give a funny grunt behind him. The end of the iron grew red. Mary Akeley turned the doll over on its face and touched it lightly with the iron. Its pants smoked.

Moe Brimstine gasped loudly and clapped his hand behind him. Then he grabbed tremblingly at the doll, but Mary Akeley closed her hand around its two arms and its middle. Instantly Brimstine's arms clamped down against his sides and stayed there. Mary stood the doll up. Brimstine straightened. She moved it away from her a few inches. Brimstine backed up into the

shelves. Sweat beaded his forehead. Mary unexpectedly flicked the doll on the cheek with the hot iron. Moe Brimstine gasped again in pain and jerked his head back.

"This sort of thing is going to go on until you give us the Green One," the young witch said matter of factly. Phil saw that a red spot had appeared on Moe Brimstine's ashen cheek.

"Only it's going to get much worse fast," she amplified, reaching for the white crusted bottle. Moe Brimstine started to say something, but she clamped the thumb of the hand holding the doll over its little mouth.

"After a while I'll be much more apt to trust the things you say," she explained. Moe Brimstine's face grew red and his eyes bulged.

Then a shadow came strolling softly along the top of the bar. Turning fearfully as he shrank away from it, Phil saw that it was green and silken and had a wise and winsome face. In a split second of realization Phil knew that it was Lucky who had breathed supernatural terror at them, just as he had at the Humberford Foundation; Lucky. who had opened Moe Brimstine's mind and built a bridge between it and Mary's, so that suggestion had made him experience everything happening to the doll.

And then Phil realized that no further unpleasant things were going to happen to Moe Brimstine and that no one was going to cause any trouble, even Carstairs or Buck, for suddenly all terror vanished and friendliness and invincible good will began to pour out of Lucky like Scotch from a bottle. Phil could feel it enter and fill at the others. There were little sighs and chuckles. Mary Akeley's lean finger shrank from the white crusted bottle, then hurriedly swept all the implements off the bar into her bag.

Lucky stood in front of Phil and stretched, slowly and luxuriantly working the muscles of his neck and back. Moe Brimstine beamed at the green cat, and the happy creases around his little eyes suggested those of Santa Claus. With an "If you don't mind?" to Phil, he reached out his big hand and softly and wonderingly stroked the silky fur.

"You sure rescued Uncle Moe in the nick," he told Lucky, scratching behind his ears. "I'm sincerely sorry for the things I did to you. I don't understand them now, and I'm sure glad you got yourself unstunned, though I don't understand how you did."

Then he straightened up and boomed out, "What'll it be, friends? The drinks are on the house!" And they were, too—several quick, happy rounds

of them. Even Lucky got a cocktail compounded of milk, egg white, powdered sugar and gin. On Phil's advice Moe put it behind the bar so Lucky could consume it in private.

Buck let out an adolescent guffaw and handed two guns, butt-first, to Brimstine.

“Reckon I better check my shootin’ arns, podner,” he explained, adapting his hillbilly accent to cowboy lingo. Moe accepted them, tested one by shooting out a light in the ceiling, and put them away. Likewise Carstairs gave up his weapons, with the added injunction that Moe was to sell them and use the money to buy more liquor when the bar gave out.

Juno, with a smacking big whiskey in front of her, leaned across Phil and assured Mary, “From now on, I'll believe every word nuts tell me, especially you and Sash."

“And I'll always tell you when we're lying,” Mary assured her back, rather mumblingly, since Dion was nuzzling her.

As customers drifted into the bar by ones and twos, Brimstine called them to join the party. As soon as they did, they became as friendly and glowing as anyone else. After a time there was a small crowd and Moe did nothing but pour, shake and serve. Shortly he quit the shaking part.

Mary broke away from Dion and picked up the Brimstine doll and hugged and kissed it, saying, “You dear, dear man.” Moe paused for a moment in his bartending to shut his eyes and quake ecstatically.

Then Lucky came out from under the bar and jumped on it and walked up and down in a very lordly way but with a definite lurch. After a bit he jumped down in front of the bar and the crowd parted for him. The drunken green creature zigzagged with dignity toward an exit.

Moe heaved himself over the bar, spilling several drinks, and called out, “Come on, everyone, let's have fun! Everything at Double AP is free!"

And so a bacchanalian procession began to weave through All Pleasures Amusement Park, with Moe serving as Bacchus, Lucky as a leopard, and, thought Phil, if the others only knew about Dion.

There were nymphs a-plenty, as Moe invited each girl to leave her concession after everybody that wanted had a turn and Moe had explained how the games were gimmicked and all the prizes had been distributed or at least offered.

Once or twice concession owners bleated indignantly at Moe's rallying cry, “It's all free, folks!” But their objections always dissolved at Lucky's arrival.

The procession grew steadily larger. Occasionally groups would leave it to go on free rides, but there weren't as many of these groups as might have been expected and they always seemed to be happy to get back.

Moe was enjoying himself with godlike capacity. He skipped like a lamb on the rubberized surfacing. He had a word and a joke for everyone and could always think of a new stunt to cap his last. Perhaps he reached his high point when he loosed a tiger and two black panthers from the animal show. Arousing no fear, they wove in and out of the procession happily, accepting caresses from everyone but apparently getting the most pleasure out of lowering their necks to rub Lucky's.

Phil was enjoying himself thoroughly, especially while romping hand in hand with a cute red head from the “Visit Vicious Venus” show, but every now and then the thought of neglected dangers and duties returned to nag him. On one of these occasions, Juno threw a big arm around his neck, almost knocking his head off, and said, “Got troubles, Phil? Give ‘em to Mama Juno and she'll throw ‘em away. Oh boy, do I love that green monkey! He's got the best little formula for living there is. Hey, looka that!"

She was pointing at Carstairs and Buck, who had discovered a concession titled in flaming red phospho-flare KICK THE LOVELY LADY INTO YOUR ARMS and were happily struggling for the possession of a very large mallet which apparently had something to do with the game. After some puzzling, Phil understood. The game was the age old one of striking a target on the ground which caused an indicator to jump up a pole—with the typical late twentieth-century addition that, if the indicator reached the top of the pole, not only did a bell ring and lights flare, but a huge hinged lower leg with a cushioned boot swung down and rudely lifted a lovely lady off a perch some three feet above the winner and into his arms, if he were ready to catch her.

This last couldn't have been any too sure, since the lovely lady was one of the glamor girls pushing fifty rather than forty. At present she was glowering cynically at Carstairs and Buck, as if certain they were infinitely more interested in the mallet than in her. She wasn't yet under Lucky's

influence, as the green cat had momentarily romped off with the black panthers to the tail end of the procession.

The two happy hep-jerks got things settled between them and took many mighty thumps at the target. The indicator jumped high but always hesitated just heartbreakingly short of the top. The onlookers sighed sympathetically. By this time most of the bacchanalian procession had gathered around the “kick the lady” concession. It was strategically located between two bars and opposite the “Mind Clearers,” as they chastely labeled themselves in blinking red fluorescents, and a dismal cavern mouth called “Pluto's Palace,” beside which was an inaccurate model of the solar system with the planets revolving jerkily.

Moe Brimstine was refreshing himself with a pitcher of beer his attendant nymphs had rushed him from one of the bars. Two black shapes came undulating in from the outskirts in pursuit of a green flash, as Lucky returned to his proper position, bringing the other felines with him.

Then, as Carstairs started to toss aside the mallet with an amiable grin of defeat, Dion da Silva came charging up and grabbed it. He stripped off his jacket and shirt, revealing an extremely hairy chest and back.

“That Dion man is sure male looking,” Mary murmured to Phil appreciatively, eyeing her hero “With those cute ears, he's just like a little old satyr."

Dion flexed his impressive muscles, took up the mallet, and crashed it down with a force which the spectators felt with their back teeth. The bell clanged, the light flashed and the big foot started its descent.

At the same time, Dora Pannes pushed out of the crowd from the direction of Pluto's Palace and walked haughtily past Dion with never a glance at him or anyone else. She was moving toward Lucky with the single-purposeness of a sleep walker.

Disregarding the kicked lovely lady, Dion sprang upon Dora Pannes, crushed her to his hairy chest, and started suffocating her with kisses. Phil gallantly stepped forward and caught the lovely lady. His knees sagged. She was now within range of Lucky's influence and pursed her lips invitingly at Phil, but he quickly set her down, aghast at something else.

With a sudden howl of furious anger, Dion had pushed Dora Pannes away from him, so that she fell down heavily. Before anyone could stop him,

Dion snatched up the mallet and brought it down with a titanic crash on the head of the gorgeous violet blonde.

“I in love with thing like that!” he screamed. “Aah!” And he continued to batter the beautiful head and body so that it bounced up and down on the rubber.

Phil was doubly shocked because this was occurring in Lucky's presence. In fact, the green cat, sitting calmly in front of Phil, seemed to be looking on with approval.

Dora Pannes began to writhe crippledly and lasciviously between blows and to sing “Slap Me Silly Honey” in a hideously gay voice. Then her head, flattened by repeated blows, split open. But instead of brains there spilled out fragments of glass, plastic and metal, some of them with wires attached. Her voice rose in a final meaningless duck quack and she stopped moving.

A number of realizations fitted themselves together in Phil's mind at this proof that Dora Pannes was not a human being, but the most advanced of mannequins operating by scanners and instruction tapes. Why, even her name was a pun from Greek mythology, a rough anagram of Pandora, the metal maiden constructed, if Phil remembered Dr. Romadka correctly, at the command of Zeus.

As Dion finally put down the mallet, a girl in slacks broke out of the crowd and grabbed Phil's arm. It was Mitzie Romadka, panting and disheveled. Behind her darted Sacheverell Akeley.

“Jack and Cookie managed to slug Llewellyn,” she panted, “and tried to do the same to us. We got away from them, but they've gone to warn Billig."

Looking around quickly, Phil realized that they had. Standing in the gloomy entrance to Pluto's Palace was Mr. Billig, flanked by a half dozen gleaming sales robots. Only these sales robots had gun muzzles jutting from their gleaming turrets. Billig had a box slung to his chest.

“Any funny business from anyone and they mow down the crowd,” he called, his fingers poised over the box “Dora, stun that cat and bring it here."

The crowd sucked back to either side and showed Billig the wreckage of Dora Pannes, with Lucky sitting serenely beside it. Phil could see the horror come into Billig's face as he sensed the golden wave of peace coming from Lucky. Billig jerked up the ortho and fired.

The blue beam splattered molten rubber a dozen feet from Lucky and did no other damage before it winked out. But as the dazzle died, Phil saw that the beam's back fire had found a target. Billig pitched forward with a large hole in his head.

Then, as if Billig's fall had been a cue, a small, fattish man stepped out through the curtains of the Mind Clearers. Although he was wearing some sort of partial gas mask, Phil recognized Dr. Romadka. He pointed a stun-gun, Lucky collapsed and was still, and the night's eerie peace shifted in a finger snap to a churning terror which seemed to Phil to take the form of a palpable vibration, a wailing roar.

Romadka darted forward toward Lucky. Beside Phil, Mary Akeley jerked something from the pocketbook and waved it in the air. “Anton!” she screamed menacingly, and when the psychiatrist looked her way, she swung the doll of him sharply against her foot, so that its head snapped against her heel.

For a moment Phil believed she was a genuine witch, for Romadka pitched forward on his face.

But then he saw that the wailing roar had been that of a dozen squad cars, converging on the spot from all directions and rocket braking so close to the crowd that there were singed legs and screams. Men uniformed and in plain clothes piled out and barked and pummeled the crowd into a semblance of control. The man who'd jumped from the foremost car lowered the stun-gun with which he'd knocked out Romadka. It was Dave Greeley.

For a moment Phil wondered bleakly whether Billig mightn't have made arrangements with the government for a deal involving the cat, naming this place as a rendezvous. Then out from behind the FBL man stepped Morton Opperly, peering about with great interest, and Phil decided that this was a world in which you couldn't even trust noble looking old scientists pretending to be great liberals and babbling government top secrets in order to win your confidence.

He held out his wrists for the handcuffs.

XX

A HALF hour after the big rubber hands of the telemanipulator yanked Phil out of his cubicle in the black maria, he had been exposed to so many sets of security checks that he guessed there were only two places in America he could be headed for: the Heptagon or White House, Junior, in New Washington.

Moved along by telemanipulators which did not seem to care which side up they carried people, he had been prodded, thumped, scanned, sampled, and subjected to other indignities. His footprints, retinal blood vessel layout and other physical patterns and dimensions had been taken, presumably for checking against his FBL dossier; likewise his voice pattern and hand writing. He had been X-rayed and magnetically tested for bombs that might be surgeried inside him. His breath and blood had been checked for BW germs and viruses. He had been thoroughly geigered. Lights had been flashed in his eyes, questions had droned in his ears. Once or twice he thought he'd been put to sleep. All throughout the process he'd felt a miserable and futile indignation.

But now, as a final rubber hand sliding in a slot in the wall hurried him down a corridor and deposited him at the entrance to a large room, he suddenly realized that he didn't care any more. In fact, he began to feel calm.

And then he was being conducted to a seat by a human usher at last. He looked around. Almost everyone he'd been mixed up with in the past few days was here: Jack and Juno Jones, looking quite awestruck, along with Cookie; Moe Brimstine with his incongruous red hair; Mitzie Romadka and her father, pale and woozy; Sacheverell and Mary Akeley; Dr. Garnett and Chancellor Frobisher from the Humberford Foundation; Dion and Dytie da Silva, the latter with a cloak huddled around her; even Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck. Along with them were quantities of unfamiliar faces—FBL people, Phil supposed. Others, presumably guards, lined the walls.

Most of these individuals were watching three men who were seated like judges behind a large desk across the room: Dr. Morton Opperly, President Robert T. Barnes, and a stony faced man whom Phil recognized as John Emmet, head of the FBL.

Emmet looked as thin as Opperly, but infinitely tougher. Like Opperly's his face showed an intense and ceaseless curiosity, but a curiosity that never became carefree, as if each new fact was for him a new responsibility.

At the moment, Emmet was speaking to Dave Greeley, who was supervising two white-smocked technicians as they telemanipulated Lucky, who was limp as a dish cloth, into a low walled box set between banks of electronic tubes and transistors. Apparently Greeley had voiced a doubt as to the safety of the set up, for Emmet was telling Greeley that the research division guaranteed that the low intensity stunfield in which Lucky had now been placed would keep the green cat harmless.

But Phil heard only the tail end of the conversation as he was being seated between Dr. Garnett and Sacheverell. The next moment the room got very quiet. Emmet looked them all over.

Finally Emmet said, “I think you all know why you're here. I want the fullest cooperation from everyone. Within the walls of security now surrounding us, complete frankness is possible. I, myself, shall be as frank as I expect you to be."

Emmet paused, then leaned forward a little. “To begin with, the creature known as the green cat is real. Its powers of influencing thought and emotion are also real. It truly intends the conquest of America and of the entire world. Finally, it is neither mutant nor mechanism, but an invader from the planetary system of another star. Dr. Opperty, will you kindly outline the information you have obtained from the being masquerading as Miss Aphrodite da Silva?"

Dr. Opperly's voice was faint but very clear.

“The eighth planet of the Star Vega—that is, if Miss da Silva and I have got our identifications straight—is earth-type though of somewhat greater mass. Its landscape, Miss da Silva tells me, can be pictured as endless, hard baked plains dotted with small lakes and marshes, and groves of tall trees. On this planet, intelligence evolved in a swift hoofed biped leaf eater, whose forelegs became specialized as organs for manipulating branches and for brief food seeking climbs. This specialization occurred when the creature was a primitive equine, so that while its hind legs were developing very horselike hoofs, its forelegs were becoming startlingly humanoid hands. The result was a being remarkably similar to the satyrs and fauns of

Greek mythology. Miss da Silva, would you care to give these people an idea?"

Dytie stood up, whipped off her cloak, and stood facing them in hirsute nudity. For a moment there was no reaction, then she stamped her hoofs twice and her figure became real. She wrapped the cloak around her and sat down.

"Miss da Silva tells me that clothing is not customary on Vega Eight," Opperly observed. "They have also advanced farther than we in technology, possessing force fields that divert gravity, also direct atomic drive spaceships capable of approaching the speed of light. But perhaps the most remarkable fact about this satyr race is that they are symbiotes, and that their symbiotic partners are a sort of creature that never evolved on Earth and that has a way of life with which we are quite unfamiliar. For the moment, I will say nothing about these symbiotic partners, except that they have no technology, did not originate on Vega Eight, and that they are not very intelligent, but are responsible for the Vegan invasion of Earth."

Opperly ignored the murmurs greeting these paradoxical statements. "Under the urging of their symbiotic partners, the satyrs—if I may use that term—sent a spaceship to Earth. I gather that the 26 light years were covered in something like 35, though of course the time was much less to the voyagers. Approaching Earth, they put their ship into an orbit and rendered it invisible. For about two more years they stayed in the ship, except for careful exploratory trips in a gravity-diverting space dinghy, They monitored our radio and TV broadcasts, learned something of our languages and customs. The satyrs realized that it would be possible to disguise themselves as earthlings and eagerly did so, since they knew it would be highly desirable for them to keep in close contact with their rather scatter-brained symbiotic partners when the invasion began.

"And now," Opperly said slowly, "I come to the point where I must describe the symbiotic partners and I'm not too sure that I can. Don't you think, Miss da Silva—?" But Dytie shook her head emphatically. Opperly shut his eyes for a moment, then he said, "You know how the presence of a pet can occasionally bring harmony into a home. Or sometimes it's a child. Well, imagine an animal that, at some nudge in the evolutionary helter-skelter, began to specialize for this purpose, and to evolve into a harmony bringer. Think how the cat has established itself in our culture, largely on

the basis of its charm, and imagine how much more successful it would be if it could bring us not only beauty but harmony and peace. Imagine such a creature gradually evolving the power to create and spray hormones that would dispel anger and create amity in other creatures, somewhat like the flowers which evolved scents and odors to attract the bees. And think of it developing, for self-defensive purposes, hormones to create terror. Imagine it acquiring extrasensory perception and a sensitivity to thought waves, and discovering in this way a whole new realm of possibilities for bringing harmony and creating peace. Imagine it becoming what might be called an espcatalyst, either by acting as an esp relay station amplifying and redirecting thought waves, or by receiving, copying and projecting clouds of punched memory molecules. Imagine it surviving and multiplying because it is paid for the peace and emotional rapport it brings, as the cat is paid for its beauty, in the coin of food, fondling and protection.

"Such a creature wouldn't develop general intelligence, because it would always depend for its survival on the care of others. Yet it would have a high intelligence in understanding and manipulating moods and feelings in other animals. It would..."

He hesitated and Dytie da Silva called to him, "...play by ear?"

"Thank you," Opperly told her. "It would always be transmitter, not originator. But although lacking general intelligence, it would always seek out beings with the highest possible general intelligence, since they could bring it the greatest security. It would be cunning in all deceptions enabling it to penetrate a new culture, such as the imitation of similar appearing animals for camouflage purposes. Like any other species, it would strive to multiply and colonize, to fulfill its destiny in the cosmos. By means of its extrasensory powers, it would spy out intelligence in distant places, even distant planets, and persuade its symbiotic partners to take it to those places and planets."

He paused. "And now I ask all of you," he said, "to try to imagine what it would be like to be the symbiotic partners of such a harmony bringing creature, to have a telepathy of feelings and perhaps of thoughts with those around you, to have a constant guard against those moments of blind rage and icy selfishness that lead to murder and to war, to be always reasonably in tune—and yet not deprived of any of your basic faculties and insights and powers?"

Again he paused, then said softly, “But I don't have to ask you, for you're in that state of being right now. You're symbiotes of the green cat—or rather, I should say, one of the green cats."

As he said that, a head rather more golden yellow than Lucky's poked itself up from Emmet's lap and looked at them all. And Phil realized that the feeling that had possessed him ever since he had come into this room was the radiance of one of Lucky's cousins. And then he felt Lucky's radiance added to it, and looking around toward the electronic contraption, he saw Lucky lifting his head over the edge.

Meanwhile, John Emmet was saying, “I told you that the green cat—or rather, cats—intended the conquest of America. I wanted you to hear a little more of the background before adding that, as far as the Federal Bureau of Loyalty and the Office of the President are concerned, the conquest has been completed.” And John Emmet smiled.

“Also,” he added, “judging from the messages we've just received from their newsmoon, along with some extraordinary tokens of faith, the Kremlin has also capitulated to the Vegan invasion."

“Is good?” Dytie shouted, jumping up. “You know just four satyrs, ten pussycats come in ship. We send seven pussycats, two satyrs behind ferrous veil—mean iron curtain. We think they need pussycats just a little bit more you do."

And with that the whole solemn meeting melted into a tumbling flood of questions and answers, shouted insights, babbling conversation. Catching a bit here and there, Phil learned how the second and yellower green cat, out of touch with Dion and Dytie for a week, had unexpectedly returned to its Vegan mistress after visiting a large number of most ecstatic church services, and how Opperly had smuggled that cat in to Barnes and so to Emmet. He heard Dytie explain how the cats were tricky at feigning unconsciousness after recovering from being stunned, and why they insisted on eating in private on Earth—they were imitating ordinary cats and knew that their hormone spraying mouths, necessarily extended in eating, would give them away. He heard Dion try to picture to Dr. Garnett how the cats on Vega Eight had taken to pointing their muzzles toward the star that was the Sun and wailing at it at night, and Dr. Garnett proudly suggested that they must have been esping the brain waves beamed out by the Humberford Foundation. Whereupon Dion tried to explain how Vega Eight had once

been a war-tom planet, until a race of what sounded like intelligent space traveling worms had brought them the green cats.

But while Phil was drinking in all this information and exchanging words with this person and that, he was moving through the churning crowd in a very definite direction and with a very definite purpose. Yet during his progress he continued to overhear scraps of discourse.

He heard Sacheverell Akeley explaining to Chancellor Frobisher that the green cats were probably all offspring of Bast anyway and that the ancient Egyptians—or perhaps Atlanteans—probably had had spaceships and had taken the green cats to Vega in the first place.

He heard Cookie gently twitting Mary Akeley about falling for a satyr and she happily assuring him that she went for men with hoofs, and in any case was going to make a doll of him.

He heard Jack pointing out to Dr. Romadka that now that they had the green cats, there wasn't going to be too much use for psychoanalysts or for thought police and commissars, and Romadka was reminding him that most of the commodities peddled by Fun Incorporated, including male-female wrestling, wouldn't have much of a market either.

He heard Carstairs, Llewellyn and Buck talking about organizing a chivalric order that was to be called the Knights of the Green Cat.

He heard Juno Jones telling Moe Brimstine how ever since her farm childhood she'd always liked animals better than humans and was very glad that an animal was going to help her change her mind—and where was that little rat Jack? Moe Brimstine explained to her in reply that he'd spent so much time getting the jump on people that he'd never learned to understand them—while poor old Hans Billig had jumped around so fast he'd never noticed people at all.

He heard John Emmet and Dave Greeley talking green cat logistics—how would they ever manage to blanket the whole world with the creatures?

He heard Morton Opperly and Dr. Garnett talking something way over his head about esp-nexuses and thought lines and which galaxy did the cats come from in the first place?

He took Mitzie Romadka's slim tired hand and assured her that he loved her and that he thought that violence and jealousy and even revengefulness were admirable up to a point.

But he never lost sight of his chief purpose. As he approached the low walled box from which Lucky was still peering calmly, President Barnes left off assuring Mary Akeley that the directive for the destruction of all cats had already been cancelled, and came over to Phil and threw his arm around his shoulders in a fatherly way and said, “Hi, young fellow, I hear how you were pretty close to this cat for a couple of days. Sorry I'm going to have to be taking him off your hands."

Phil straightened up. “You're not,” he said, “Lucky is my cat."

“Well, see here, young fellow,” Barnes protested amiably, “I'm the president, so I have to have one of these cats. Emmet has one already and the Humberford Foundation really needs one, and there are only three in the country. You heard the young lady from Vega say it."

Several people and the two satyrs wandered up, attracted by the argument.

“I don't care,” Phil said, greatly encouraged by the tightness with which Mitzie's hand gripped his. “I know that this is a cosmic crisis and all that, but this is my cat and I fed it and I'm going to keep it. C'mere, Lucky."

Lucky jumped out of the box into his arms.

“I guess that proves it,” Phil said.

Barnes looked at him just a bit indignantly and there were all sorts of murmured comments, but just then they heard a tiny and varied mewing. It came from the box from which Lucky had sprung.

They looked in and saw five tiny duplicates of Lucky nosing their little conical faces upward.

Dytie said, “They small, but they just much good big pussycat, just much helpful."

Barnes said, spreading himself around, “Why, now there'll be one for the Army, the Navy, Dr. Opperly, myself, that goon back east who thinks he's going to be the next president..."

“Now Bobbie,” Opperly suggested, “don't go giving away more kittens than you've got."

“...and, I was about to say,” Barnes finished calmly, “one for this young fellow here."

Phil looked down at Lucky cradled in his arms. “So you're a she after all,” he said.

“Oh no!” Dytie burst out excitedly, half out of her cloak and half in it. “You no un'erstand Vega. On Vega sex different. On Vega it's like...” and she screwed up her face, seeking for the word.

“Kangaroos,” Opperly interposed.

“Yes!” Dytie exclaimed triumphantly. “Only this difference: wife carry babies while, then babies go in father's pouch, he carry rest time. Everybody help. Later on, babies leave pouch, nurse from mother. Take off pants, Dion, show pouch."

But Dion refused rather indignantly.

“Vega men much modest,” Dytie observed to Phil. “Anyway, Lucky is he."

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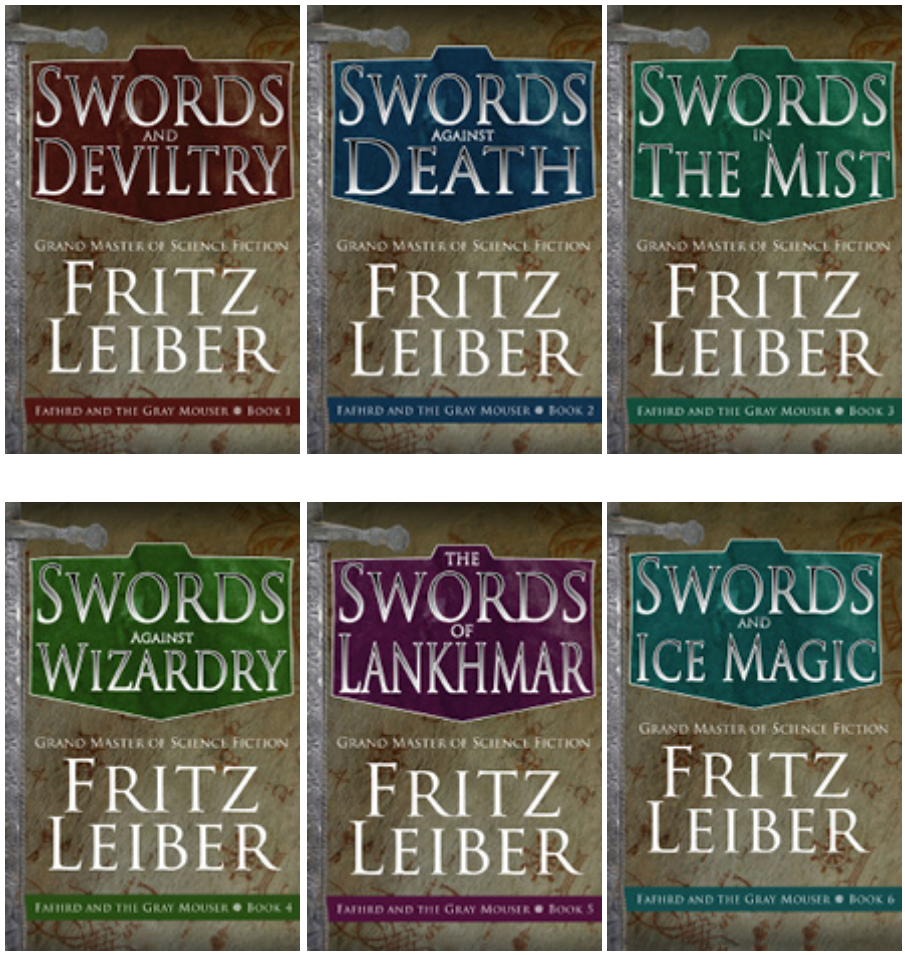
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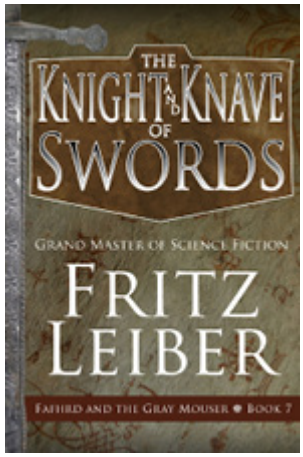
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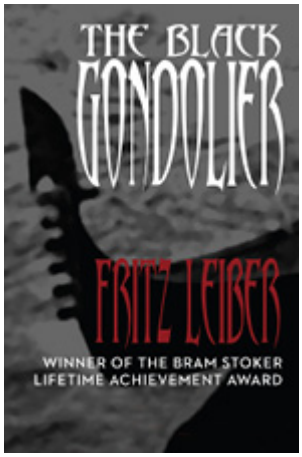
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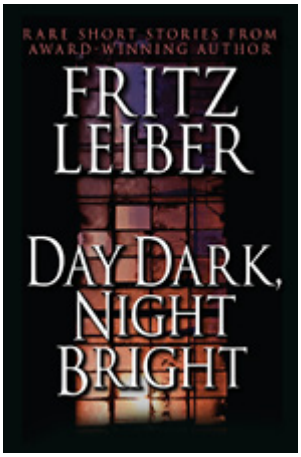
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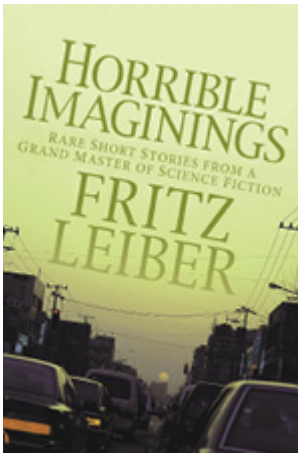
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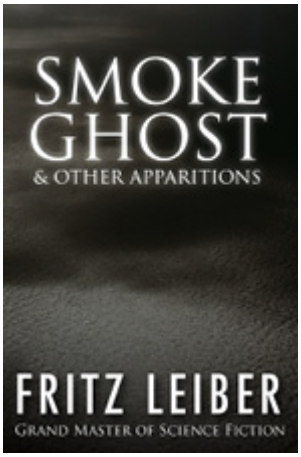

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